

**WHITE
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Dénes Bernád

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Messerschmitt Bf 109G *Strela*

Bulgaria's Ultimate Fighter

*"There is one aircraft, one fighter, that has unquestionably brought the greatest glory to the Bulgarian military aviation – this is undoubtedly the Messerschmitt Me 109" – wrote a noted Bulgarian historian, Stefan Semerdjiev, in the September 2003 issue of Airpower Journal. The author of this book fully agrees with this statement, adding only that it was the Bf 109G sub-type, the famous *Gustav*, which deserves the accolade¹.*

* * *

Following the unexpected American air raid against Rumania by 13 B-24 'Liberator' bombers on 12 June 1942 (the so-called 'Halverson Project', or 'HALPRO'), it became obvious to Berlin what Sofia had demanded for some time: the air defence of Bulgaria needs to be strengthened. At that time, the most modern fighter aircraft the Bulgarians had were the handful of Messerschmitt Bf 109Es, a type which was already *passé* by then by the latest standards. The *Emils* were complemented by hopelessly outdated Avia B.534 biplanes, as well as the similarly obsolete Polish P.24s and German pre-war Heinkel He 51s and Arado Ar 65s – these two types being used only as trainers.

Sensing the change in Berlin's reluctance to export top armaments, including aircraft, the Bulgarians requested 54 Bf 109G fighters (among the total of 157 warplanes)². This was enough to equip a three-squadron-strong new fighter group (3x16=48 machines), plus the staff flight (6 machines). The request was initially turned down by the Germans, who badly needed the potent fighter to cover their own increasing needs. Only after backstage political manoeuvring did Hitler eventually agree to supply a limited number of modern warplanes to his trustworthy Balkan ally, under the code name 'Barbara Plan'³.

1 The '*Gustav*'s eldest sister, the '*Emil*', saw only very limited combat action in Bulgarian service (for details, see vol. 1).

2 The 157 demanded warplanes consisted of: 54 Bf 109G fighters, 42 Dornier Do 17, 12 Heinkel He 111 and 12 Dornier Do 215 bombers, 12 Junkers Ju 87 dive bombers, 12 Focke-Wulf Fw 189 long-range reconnaissance airplanes, 12 Arado Ar 196 seaplanes and one Fieseler Fi 156 for MEDEVAC purposes.

3 Eventually delivered, in the first batch of the 'Barbara Plan', were: 23 Bf 109G-2s, 6 Do 11Ms, 18 Fw 189As, 12 Ar 196As and 89 D.520s.

One of the very first photos taken in Bulgaria of the newly delivered Bf 109G-2s, during the spring of 1943. Of particular interest is the black triangle, barely seen on the mid-fin of the 'Gustav' in the background. The aircraft's serial number is written, in white, in the upper area, over the dividing line; however, the aircraft type's identification code (the so-called Nomenklaturen Nomer) is strangely missing (see explanation in the main text). The rudder is factory painted in the Bulgarian national tricolour, which would soon give way to yellow. The engine cowling wears standard factory camouflage, which would soon also be overpainted with yellow.





Bf 109G-2, No. 29 (W.Nr. 14796) is being refuelled at Karlovo airfield, sometime in the spring of 1943. By this date, the factory applied Bulgarian rudder tricolour was overpainted with yellow and the Nomenklaturen Nomer (originally missing), 7057, was applied on the bottom of the black triangle, positioned on mid-fin. The black stencilling, barely visible on the rear fuselage, aft the serial number, was in Bulgarian language. The military licence plate of the fuel tanker (an Opel Blitz 3,6-36 S type), BB 80094, identifies it as 'special purpose vehicle', as per military control number allocation order of 15 July 1938. The air force's winged insignia is visible on the top of the licence plate.

By order of 19 December 1941, vehicles of the air force were separated from army vehicles, hence the new BB prefix (read VV, Văzdushni Voyski, i.e., Air Force), as opposite to the general B (read: V, as Voyska, i.e., Army), as it used to be the case before.

The aforementioned shock US bombing of the neighbouring Rumania changed the German leaders' minds. Besides freeing 16 modern Bf 109G-2s for urgent export to Bulgaria in late 1942 as a stop-gap measure, Berlin also lifted the ban on French arms delivery to its Balkan ally. Using the "French connection", a total of 100 Dewoitine D.520 fighters eventually reached Bulgaria (see appropriate chapter). The order for the 16 Bf 109G-2s, equipped with DB 605 engines, was eventually signed on 18 February 1943. The value of the contract was set at 3.443.200 Reichsmarken (RM).

The Bf 109G-2s – all made by Wiener Neustädter Flugzeugwerke (WNF) – were crated in 13 railway wagons and shipped by train. This first batch consisted of the following aircraft (*Werknummer/Stammkennzeichen*): 14732 (RJ+SB), 14733 (RJ+SC), 14737 (RJ+SG), 14742 (RJ+SL), 14785 (GJ+QC), 14786 (GJ+QD), 14788 (GJ+QF), 14789 (GJ+QG), 14790 (GJ+QH), 14791 (GJ+QI), 14792 (GJ+QJ), 14793 (GJ+QK), 14794 (GJ+QL), 14795 (GJ+QM), 14796 (GJ+QN) and 14797 (GJ+QO).

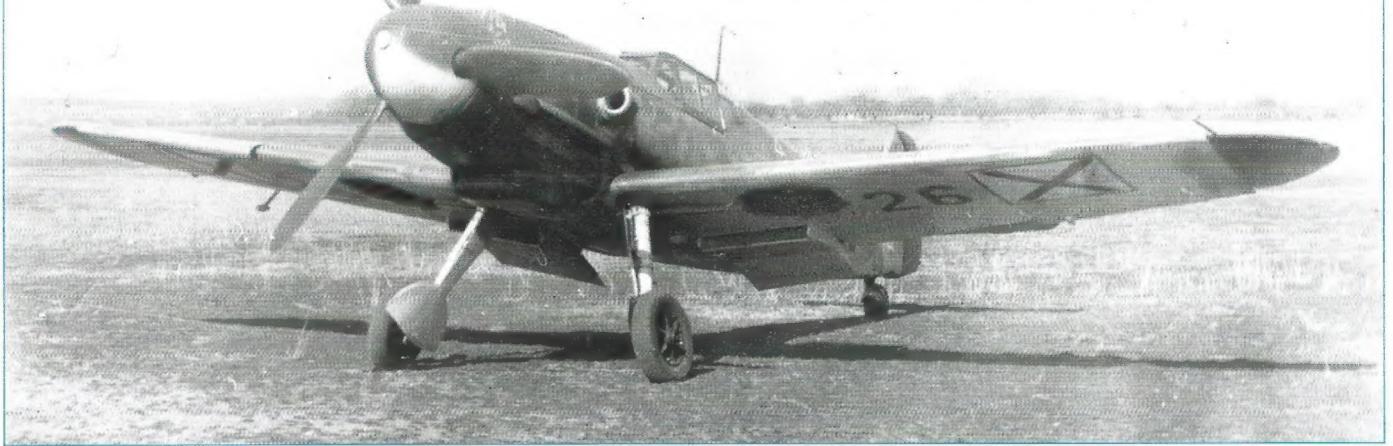
Based on the *Werknummer*, many aircraft in the 14501–14850 production batch were built as Bf 109G-2/R3 (R for *Rüstsatz*, i.e., conversion kit) designated an extended-range fighter with one 300-litre underbelly drop-tank. Therefore, some, if not all, G-2s in this batch delivered to Bulgaria were of this sub-version. Others could have been easily retrofitted with this kit.

The shipment arrived at Karlovo station on 25 February 1943. A document of the *Deutsche Luftwaffenmission Bulgarien* (DLM-B, German Air Force Mission to Bulgaria), Section Ia, dated 1.03.1943, mentions "16 Me 109 G in Karlovo (6. Jagdregiment) mit Bahntransport eingetroffen und im Aufbau. Fliegendes- und Bodenpersonal in Ausbildung begriffen." ["16 Me 109 G arrived in Karlovo (6th Fighter Regiment) with rail transport and is in assembly process. Aircrews and ground staff are being trained. "] The Bulgarian language protocol listing all 16 aircraft by their original German *Werknummern*, as well as the VNVV (acronym of Royal Bulgarian Air Force) registration numbers (NN) assigned to them⁴, is dated 10 March 1943. The first six individual acceptance certificates (*Übernahmebestätigung*) are dated five days earlier. The last such acceptance certificates, for nine individual aircraft, are dated 9 May, which is the date when the last *Gustavs* of this first batch were taken over by the Bulgarian party.

Once accepted by the VNVV, the 16 brand new Bf 109G-2s were assigned to the 682. *Iztrebitelno Yato* (Fighter Squadron), 3/6. *Iztrebitelen Orlyak* (Fighter Group) of the 6. *Iztrebitelen Polk* (Fighter Regiment), based on Marno Pole (Karlovo) main fighter air base. Initially, they were marked from No. 20 on their rear fuselage sides and underwing surface, in black, in continuation of the numbering assigned to the 19 Bf 109Es. A couple of months later, however, the aircraft received green individual numbers on the fuselage side and wing undersurfaces – green being the squadron identification colour – starting

4 This protocol already includes the assigned NNs for each individual aircraft, marked with a slash after the original construction number (e.g., номера N. 14793/20). Unfortunately, this practice was discontinued later on.

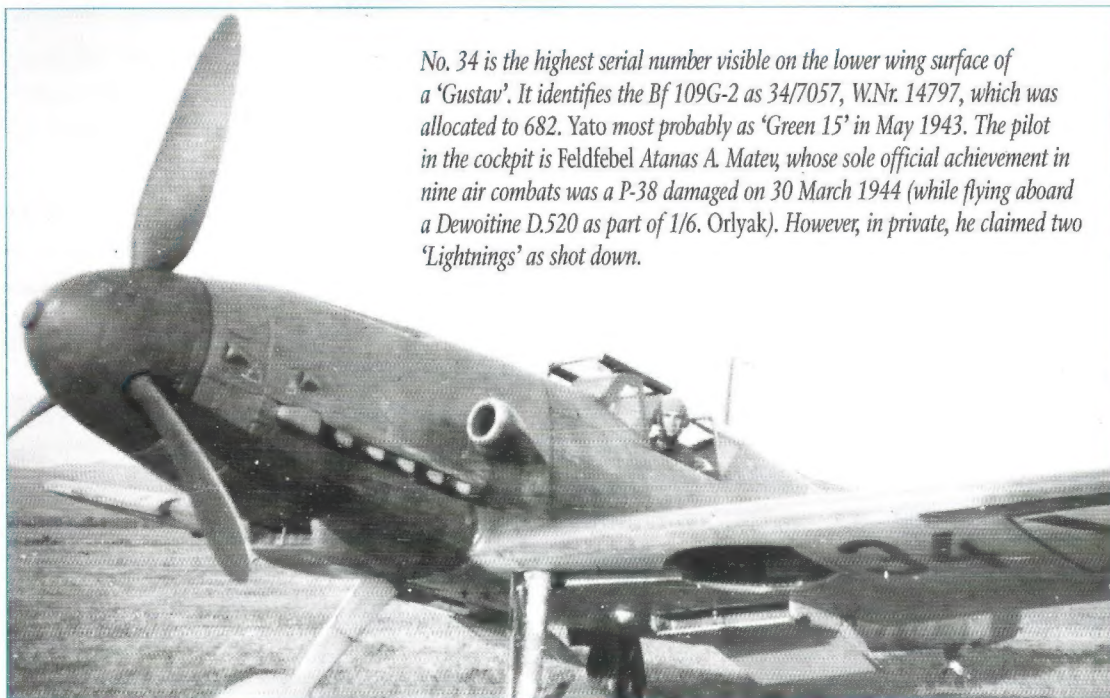
No. 26 (W.Nr. 14788) is parked on the grassy field of Karlovo air base in the early summer of 1943. Interestingly, the spinner is painted $\frac{1}{4}$ white (RLM 21) and $\frac{3}{4}$ black green (RLM 70), and not in the standard $\frac{1}{3}$ rd white, $\frac{2}{3}$ rd black green. Barely seen in this view, behind the fully open radiator flap, is the 'Strela's' serial number (in this case 26), applied on the rear fuselage, in black, just like it was on the wing under surface. This 'Gustav', like the other ones of the first batch, was built by WNF in 1942.



No. 28 (W.Nr. 14790) was assigned to the first VNV fighter squadron to be equipped with the new German technique, namely 682. Yato, in May 1943. Notice the yellow wingtip and the wraparound engine cowling. Paired with yellow rudder and elevators, these Axis identifications were typical to the early period of Bulgarian service. Following the serial number style change, presumably around July 1943, this particular aircraft would most probably become 'Green 9'. This 'Strela' also has the white segment painted on only the $\frac{1}{4}$ th of the spinner surface.



No. 34 is the highest serial number visible on the lower wing surface of a 'Gustav'. It identifies the Bf 109G-2 as 34/7057, W.Nr. 14797, which was allocated to 682. Yato most probably as 'Green 15' in May 1943. The pilot in the cockpit is Feldfebel Atanas A. Matev, whose sole official achievement in nine air combats was a P-38 damaged on 30 March 1944 (while flying aboard a Dewoitine D.520 as part of 1/6. Orlyak). However, in private, he claimed two 'Lightnings' as shot down.



'No. 3' was a Bf 109G-2, photographed on 19 August 1943. Notice that by this date, the Bulgarian serial number (between 20-35, in black) had been replaced by coloured numbers, in this case white (the significant contrast between the white numeral and the light blue wing undersurface finish is noteworthy), outlined with a darker colour, possibly green. This colour combination identifies the Yato as the 672nd. The propeller spinner still wears the factory-standard 2/3rd Black Green, 1/3rd White segments. The broad white spiral was applied on black spinner within a few weeks, as a photo taken in late September 1943 already shows this recognition/safety feature on aircraft No. 5. Interestingly, this particular 'Strela' does not have yellow wraparound engine cowling, standard for that time period.



from 1 (assigned to the squadron leader). This renumbering was a departure from VNVV standards; it followed *Luftwaffe* style, was designed to assist cooperation with the powerful ally.

The leader of the first Bf 109G-equipped squadron was none other than the would-be top scoring Bulgarian fighter 'ace' pilot, *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov⁵, a veteran airman who attended the piloting school in Germany prior to the war, and had hundreds of flying hours under his belt. Other prominent pilots of this élite fighter squadron were: *Poruchik* Lyuben Kondakov, *Podporuchik* Hristo Krăstev, *Podporuchik* Mihail Grigorov, *Podporuchik* Ivan Bonev, *Podporuchik* Evgheni Tonchev and last, but not least *Podporuchik* Petăr Bochev, would-be second ranking 'ace' with 13 (Bulgarian) victories. These men were all future successful pilots, scoring many 'kills' against the USAAF. Commanding Officer of the 3/6. Fighter Group, *Kapitan* Chudomir Toplodolski – former chief instructor at the Fighter School – was an 'old hand', and future fourth-ranking top 'ace' with 8 (Bulgarian) victories.

Not all members of the 682nd Fighter Squadron were seasoned pilots, however. There were novices as well, who had difficulty in switching from their obsolescent aircraft types to the modern, fast Bf 109G. Transition from older types was performed first with the docile Bf 108 *Taifun*, then with the Bf 109E *Emil*, to get acquainted with the demanding Bf 109G, well known as capricious, particularly during take-off and landing. In general, less than half of the students of the *Strela* course actually graduated and became fighter pilots. Several accidents happened, none fatal, though. Unfortunately, details are generally lacking⁶.

Transition to the new matériel was aided by German instructors, who not only trained Bulgarian pilots of the 3/6. *Orlyak* how to fly the '109, but also taught combat tactics and general air warfare basics *Luftwaffe* style. Initially, from February 1943, it was *Major* Gerhard Homuth, formerly with I./JG 27 serving in Africa, who had already accumulated 61 aerial victories to his credit, who headed up the first of these training missions to Bulgaria. While *Major* Homuth was a capable fighter pilot, the training programme he initiated was hampered by a number of problems. The biggest problem encountered would be that *Major* Homuth was tasked to perform the training courses with an insufficient number of suitable trainer aircraft needed for the large numbers of Bulgarian student pilots that had been assigned

5 The thorough search done by the Author and his Czech colleague, Jaroslav Kreč, for Stoyan Stoyanov's pilot's logbooks ended with a partial success. Only the pre-war, early war and post-war logbooks were located, but the main prize, the late war logbook (1943-1945), with all his flights on the Bf 109G, is missing. Reportedly, based on former VNVV airmen's memoirs, all logbooks of Bf 109G pilots who flew against the Americans were collected soon after the about-face of September 1944, as to hide their participation in the anti-USAAF campaign. All fighter pilots of the 2/6. and 3/6. *Orlyatsi* were instructed to tell the American investigators of the Allied Commission of Control that they did not fight at all against USAAF warplanes. The Bulgarian flight crews were afraid of possible reprisals, hence the sudden 'disappearance' of all incriminating documents.

6 A German document mentions a landing accident of *Luftwaffe* pilot Fichler ("Nullu" in a Rumanian document), who was transporting Bf 109G-2, W.Nr. 10360 (RF+FC), from Sofia to ASAM-Pipera, Rumania, on 26.03.1943. The pilot applied brakes too harshly to avoid collision with some I.A.R. 80s and somersaulted. The aircraft was earlier flown by the famous *Ltn.* Walter Nowotny of 2./JG 54, who had an accident on 11 August 1942 (hit an obstacle at Ryelbitzy, damaged 50%).

to the programme. Language barriers also hampered training efficiency.

While training of the Bulgarian 3/6. *Orlyak* pilots under *Major* Homuth continued at a sluggish pace, it was soon to experience a boost. In the first week of June of 1943, *Major* Johannes Seifert, former commander of I./JG 26, arrived in Sofia to take over command of the training programme from *Major* Homuth⁷. The energetic *Maj.* Seifert brought a new and determined 'push' to the programme. He intensified the tempo and included theoretical scenarios in how large four-engine bombers would most efficiently be engaged. This last piece of training would be put to good use in the months to come. *Major* Seifert's stay in Bulgaria would however be short, as he returned to active duty as *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 26 in September of 1943⁸. He left the training in the hands of *Major* Hermann Hollweg, former commanding officer of I./JG 104. *Maj.* Hol-

weg would remain in charge of the training mission for the next time period. Another high-ranking *Luftwaffe* officer who assisted the Bulgarian flyers to train to the new German technique was *Major* Helmut Kühle, former *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 52⁹ until 31.08.1943, who had under his control the Bulgarian air defence and warning system.

Training activity could not, and did not, go on without 'special events' – as documents called the accidents and incidents. On 19 July, while testing a recently delivered Bf 109G-2, NN 36/7057 (W.Nr. 13517¹⁰, engine DB 605A, No. 25718), *Poruchik* Nikolay Georgiev Yordanov, commanding officer of the 672nd Squadron, came up short during landing and broke the undercarriage leg during rolling on the runway. Despite these accidents, the number of Bulgarian pilots who successfully transitioned to the Bf 109G grew steadily. All expressed their utmost satisfaction with the new German matériel.

Well before transition courses could conclude, however, an unexpected major event took place. It was the precursor of the future happenings that would shape the activity of the fighter arm of the Bulgarian air force.



"*Poruchik Stoyanov looking for the enemy*" – this well-known photo is often labelled as such in Bulgarian publications, and dated 1 August 1943, when the first clash with American war-planes occurred. In fact – as the real date on the original print reveals – the photo was actually taken preceding the epic USAAF 'Tidal Wave' Operation, on 15 July 1943, at Karlovo airfield, as per the original handwriting in blue ink. At this point, Stoyanov was certainly oblivious of the upcoming sudden event that would propel him to fame and highest recognition. At this time, the black serial number most probably gave way to coloured number. In this particular case, 'Black 20' was replaced by 'Green 1' on both fuselage sides, as well as on the wing under surfaces. Notice the red Bulgarian language service writing on the wing root, "Внимание. не стъпвайте" (i.e., 'ATTENTION. DO NOT STEP ON').

The End of the 'Symbolic War'

On 1 March 1941, Bulgaria signed the 'Tripartite Pact' and officially joined the Axis bloc (originally consisting of Germany, Italy and Japan, followed by Hungary, Rumania and Slovakia). Following this, the Bulgarian government declared war on the United Kingdom and the United States on 13 December 1941 (but not on the Soviet Union)¹¹. In turn, the United States officially declared war on Bulgaria on 5 June 1942. Apart from the brief 'HALPRO' episode of 12 June 1942, the state of war between Bulgaria and the USA remained largely symbolic – thus the expression 'symbolic war'. This 'all quiet on the

7 *Maj.* Homuth returned to frontline duty in early July 1943, as *Gruppenkommandeur* (Group Commander) of I./JG 54, based in the Northern sector of the Eastern Front, and flying the Fw 190A. On 2 August 1943, on one of his first combat missions, Homuth was engaged in a dogfight with Soviet fighters. He finally managed to shoot down a P-39 Airacobra; however, Homuth failed to return from this mission and was posted missing in action. His exact fate remains unknown. His final tally stood at 63 air victories; all but two achieved against the Western Allies.

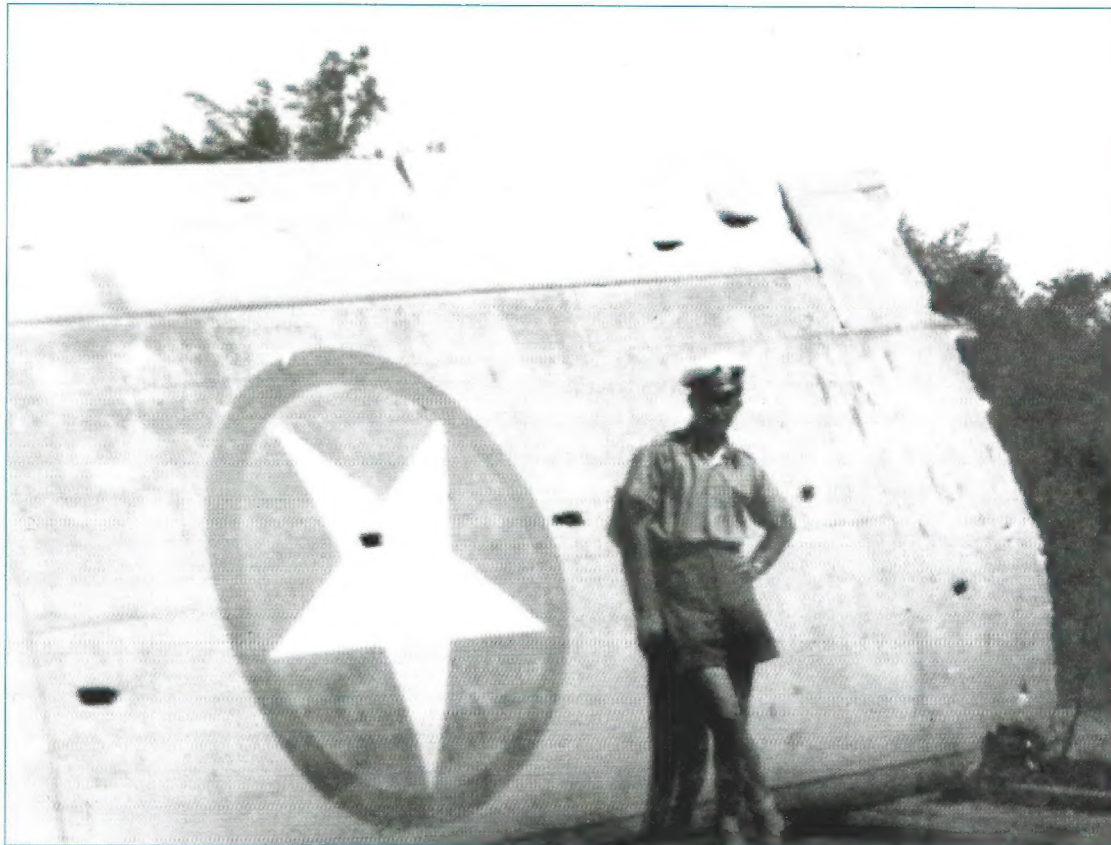
8 On 25 November 1943, *Maj.* Seifert led 6. and 8./JG 26 against USAAF P-38s of the 55th FG over Lille, France. During combat, Seifert's Fw 190A-6 collided with a P-38 and crashed, the pilot being killed in the wreckage. His final tally stood at 57 air victories.

9 Reportedly, *Maj.* Kühle was popular with the men of II./JG 52 he led, never overplayed the fact that he was their superior. After fleeing from Bulgaria in early September 1944, following Bulgaria's about-face, *Maj.* Kühle became *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 6. He found his death on 1 January 1945, during 'Operation Bodenplatte', when he was hit by AA fire and crashed with his Bf 109G-14.

10 Reference to W.Nr. 13517, sent for repair to Rumania were found by the author in an undated Bulgarian report of Bf 109Es and Gs sent to ASAM-Pipera, as well as in Rumanian military archives in 2007, among the aircraft handled by the German mission at ASAM (without note that they were actually Bulgarian), in a document dated 27.09.1943.

11 An interesting side story coming from Soviet sources relates to an enemy Bf 109, which was forced to land by airmen of the 17 VA (Air Army) in the region of Starobelsk, USSR, in the spring of 1943. The pilot turned to be a Bulgarian, reportedly "mobilised into the German air force", who was on his first combat sortie. Unfortunately, no further details are available.

The victorious Stoyanov poses at the wing of a 'Liberator' bomber downed on 1 August 1943. Most probably, the broken wing belonged to B-24D (No. 41-11840), called 'The Witch', shot down by Stoyanov's squadron mate, Bochev (see photo below).



Podporuchik Petăr Bochev (at right) explains to the head of the VNV, General-Mahyor Dimităr Ayryanov, details of the epic air battle of 1 August 1943, when he managed to shoot down a USAAF 'Liberator', being the first Bulgarian fighter pilot to score a 'kill' during WW2. In turn, the bomber's on-board gunners could also score a few hits on Bochev's mount, 'Green 6' (NN 25/7057), including on the yellow painted port elevator, as is visible on the photo. The slimly-built Bochev would become the second ranking 'ace' with 13 (Bulgarian) air victory points. He died in German captivity in October 1944, after his '109 had been shot down by ground fire during strafing of Wehrmacht targets in Macedonia. The text on the bottom of the photo says: "Следъ първата ми победа! 1.8.43, подпор. Бочевъ" (After my first victory! Podpor. Bochev. 1 Aug. 43).



Bulgarian front' status would come to an abrupt end on 1 August 1943. That Sunday, in the early hours, 178 B-24 Liberator bombers of the US 8th and 9th Air Forces took off from Benghazi, Libya, to perform the first major bombing raid against Europe (Operation 'Tidal Wave'). No fighter escort was assigned to protect them. Although the targets were located in Rumania – in the strategically important oilfields in the Ploesti area – the air armada had to pass through Bulgarian airspace, both there and back.

Even though the Bulgarian air force high command realised the air war would sooner or later reach Bulgaria following the experimental air raid of 12 June 1942, and more recently, the bombing of Sedes airfield (Greece) – located less than 300 km from Sofia – by B-24s of the 9th AAF on 24 June 1943, they were not expecting this to happen so fast. Therefore, the Bulgarian defenders were unprepared for the intrusion of the large enemy bomber formation into Bulgarian airspace. As noted earlier, transition to



The victors of the first engagement with American bombers on 1 August 1943 pose with their freshly awarded German Iron Crosses, 2nd Class, in late September 1943. On the first photo, three fighter pilots who attacked efficiently the 'Tidal Wave' 'Liberators' and scored victory points are seen: Podporuchik Hristo Krăstev, 3 points (at left), Poruchik Stoyan Stoyanov, 5 points (in centre) and Podporuchik Petăr Bochev, 3 points (at right). In the second photo, the men are accompanied by their commander, Kapitan Chudomir Toplodolski, leading officer of the 3/6. Orlyak (who did not score any points on that occasion and thus was not decorated). Stoyanov and Bochev are wearing the 'Order of Bravery', awarded to them by Tsar Boris on 7 August. The pilots all wear black armband in mourning Tsar Boris III, who passed away suddenly on 28 August 1943, shortly after returning to Sofia from a meeting with Hitler. Curiously, the fourth victor of that big day, Podporuchik Ivan Bonev (5 points), is not on the photo. Of special interest is the 'Strela' in the hangar, 'Green 5' (as per the number outlined in white, seen on the port wing's lower surface). It clearly sports the wide, white spiral on the black spinner, pointing towards the usage of this recognition and safety marking from as early as September 1943 – in contradiction to what has been known until now, namely mid-1944.



the first batch of Bf 109G fighters was still in full swing, with further deliveries being scheduled only for the second half of the year. In order to better cover the airspace of the capital, the 682nd Fighter Yato was scheduled to be dispatched to airfields located in the vicinity of Sofia, more precisely to Bozhurishte and Vrazhdebna, in early July 1943. The plan was that the Bf 109Gs had to be ready to perform air interdiction missions from 15 July. The main patrol area designated for the air defenders was south and south-west of the capital. At this time, there were no *Luftwaffe* fighter units stationed in Bulgaria to assist their Balkan ally. Anti-aircraft artillery was strengthened as well. Nonetheless, these measures were less than adequate in countering the massive air threat the Allies represented to Bulgaria. The Messerschmitts did



The broadly smiling Poruchik Stoyan Stoyanov is photographed with the same occasion. Above his left pocket, the 'Order of Bravery', awarded to him personally by Tsar Boris III shortly before his untimely death, is seen.

Poruchik Stoyan Stoyanov again, proudly displaying the Iron Cross, 2nd Class, awarded to him by the Germans, based on the documents signed by Reichsmarschall Göring on 22.09.1943. Interestingly, he also has the ribbon of the Iron Cross inserted in his buttonhole, which is superfluous.

anov (the others were Podporuchik Ivan Bonev, Podporuchik Hristo Krăstev and Podporuchik Petăr Bochev) cruised over Sofia back and forth, failed to locate the enemy. All ten serviceable Bf 109G-2s of the squadron landed after an hour of fruitless patrolling; the two trios on the base airfield of Karlovo, while Stoyanov and his men on Vrazhdebna.

The next alarm sounded less than two hours later. It was triggered by the same US bomber formation, this time flying on the return leg. The major difference in this occasion was that the bombers did not fly in tight 'boxes', but scattered over many miles. Some bombers limped back homewards with only a couple of engines running, some displayed heavy structural damage, many were peppered with bullet holes. Some flew in a loose formation, some alone. There were two distinct routes the returning 'Liberators' took. One was south-west, back to their base, while the other one was south, towards neutral Turkey and Cyprus. The latter destination was chosen by the crews who did not see a good chance for their stricken mounts to be able to return to Libya, or friendly territory (Malta).

The four Bulgarian Bf 109Gs, which had landed on Vrazhdebna airfield for refuelling, scrambled at 15:10. Stoyanov and his wingman Bonev first, followed by Krăstev and his wingman Bochev a few minutes later, as the pilots had to hand crank-start the engines themselves¹². This time, the two *dvoyka* (pair) did not miss the 'Ploesti Express', they were directed to the proper area. While flying towards the city of Ferdinand¹³, the *dvoyka* led by Poruchik Stoyan Stoyanov spotted the enemy, 16 bombers, flying in south-west direction. Based on Stoyanov's memoir, he followed the *Dogans* which had taken off earlier and that's how he located the enemy formation. He expected to find twin-engine bombers, as was reported earlier, but found four-engine ones instead, which he quickly identified as 'Liberators'.

The war diary of the 3/6. *Orlyak*¹⁴ records the details of the first combat engagement of the Bf 109Gs: Stoyanov caught up with the last bomber over Trăn. He attacked the target repeatedly. After several passes, the enemy bomber started to smoke; a crew-member was observed jumping with parachute. The bomber then crashed. Stoyanov attacked another one, which started to smoke as well and left the formation.

Stoyanov recalls in his post-war memoir that as his *dvoyka* approached the target from the rear, the bombers tightened their formation and opened heavy fire upon the attackers. This deterred Stoyanov from approaching them closer and he pulled away, obviously having not fired at them. After that, he attempted a sidewise attack from the right. He opened fire from about 1000 m, but soon realised it was pointless. So, he pondered, from the back was too dangerous, from the side – pointless. That is why he decided to perform a head-on attack. He flew ten km ahead of the slower bombers, then made a 180-degree turn and flew straight towards them, head-on. He selected a target – the middle one, the lead machine. As the target filled the Revi gunsight, he opened fire. The bombers returned fire. The adversaries closed each other at a combined speed exceeding 900 km/h. Stoyanov observed that the targeted bomber lowered its nose and descended from the

12 The two pairs lost each other and performed their combat activity separately.

13 After the war was renamed Mihaylovgrad, today is called Montana.

14 In fact, it's not the original combat diary that is preserved in the Bulgarian archives, but rather a 'sanitised' summary, written by observing the post-war grammar (thus originating sometime after 1945).



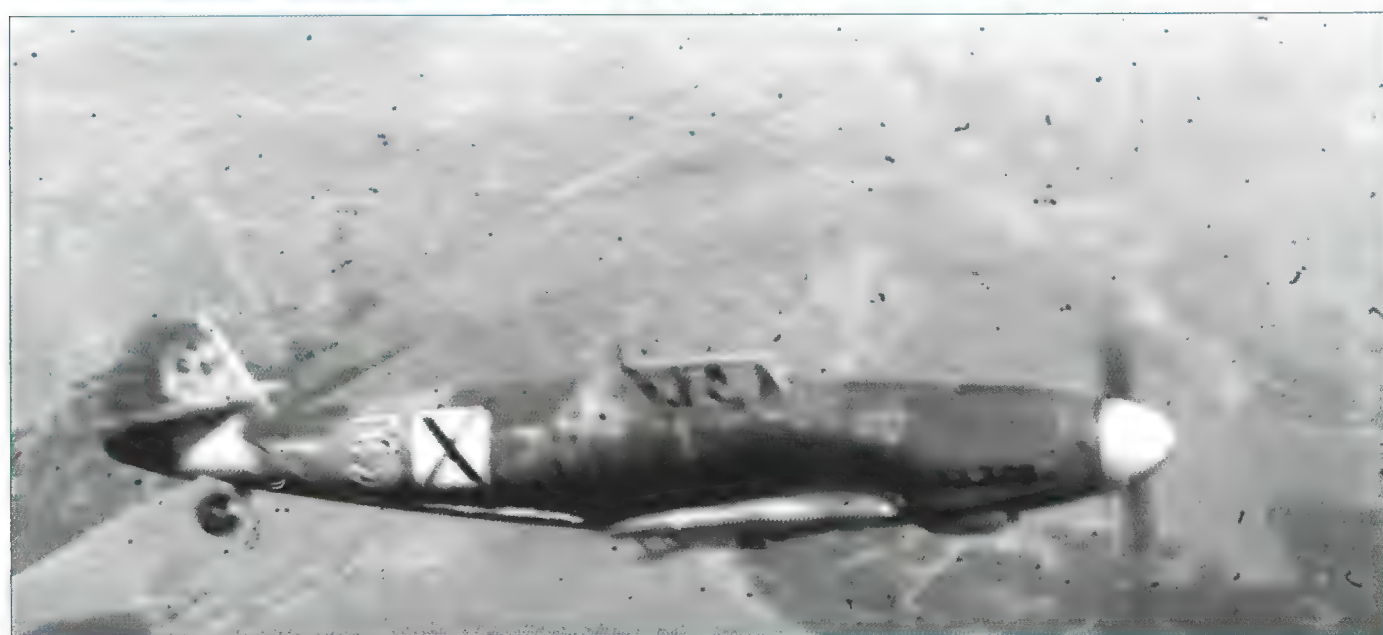


The guns of a Strela G-2 being adjusted in the concrete shooting stand, so the bullets would hit a certain point at a set distance. Based on the narrow arm of the marking cross, this Messerschmitt '109 was part of the initial batch that arrived in early 1943. The aircraft's board number is painted on the undersurface of the wing, in black. The last digit is 9, while the first one may have been 2.

A Bulgarian pilot leans against the leading edge of the wing of his 'Strela' G-2, sometime in mid-1943. Based on the narrow black cross of the wing marking, this aircraft was also part of the first batch delivered to the Bulgarians.



The pilot of 'Green 5' (NN 24/7057, originally W.Nr. 14742) of 682. Yato makes a close pass to his squadron mate's aircraft, sometime in 1943. Podporuchik Hristo Krăstev often flew this particular aircraft that year. The engine cowling and rudder are painted in yellow. However, the upper wingtip does not appear to be yellow. See also photo on page 15, top.



tight formation. He could not continue to observe it any further, as he was flying head-on with the other bombers and had to take care of his own escape – he flew between the bombers and pushed his *Strela* down and to the side. He managed to escape the American gunners' cross fire and soon cleared the bomber formation. Emboldened by this success, Stoyanov decided to try his luck again. This time, he attacked from down-behind. After the third attack on the selected target, the bomber's left engines started to smoke heavily, trailing black smoke. The 'Liberator' left the formation and started to descend. Stoyanov, again, could not follow its flight, as he and his wingman were now flying deep over Macedonia, far away from their base.

After Stoyanov completed his daring attacks and expended all his ammunition, it was the turn of his wingman, *Ppor.* Bonev, to make his mark. He also jumped on the intruders, managing to knock out a 'Liberator' over Karakash and damaging another one further on. At that point, he broke off the attack as he also used up all his ammunition. Then they decided to return, being far from home and low on fuel. When the pair landed on the airfield, the exhausted Petăr Bochev was already there, a cheering crowd surrounding him. They joined the jubilation, savouring the success of their first encounter with the dreaded enemy.

The second *dvoyka*, led by *Podporuchik* Hristo Krăstev, took off a couple of minutes after Stoyanov's pair. Despite this, it was the one which met the target first. While trying to catch up with the lead *dvoyka*, they spotted a 4-bomber enemy formation near Vărshets and decided to attack them. Both *Ppor.* Krăstev and his wingman, *Ppor.* Bochev, strafed the enemy twice. One of the assaulted bombers, fired upon by Bochev at close range, blew up near Tsaribrod (currently Dimitrovgrad, Serbia). By closing in to the target at up to 50 m, the daring Bulgarian almost collided with it, but somehow managed to pass by. Several bullets punctured the '109's airframe, but caused no harm. Bochev then circled the wreck, to be able to properly report the crash location needed for the victory homologation. In the meantime, Krăstev, now flying alone, continued to chase the mauled enemy. He performed several firing passes over one of the B-24s, which started to smoke. However, the wounded bomber managed to reach the safety of the clouds around Vladichin Han, so disappeared from the sight of the hunter.

The *Strela* pilots of *Por.* Kondakov, based on Karlovo, could not take off for the second time, as the high-octane fuel had to be pumped in the '109's reservoirs from drums manually, one by one, due to an electricity black-out that prevented automated fuelling. This was a rather slow process, and by the time it was completed it was already too late – the enemy departed beyond the fighters' range. Therefore, they remained grounded, to their regret, being left out of the chase and the possibility of further air victories.

After the hunt was over, three Bulgarian '109s managed to land safely, all pilots victorious. A fourth one was listed as 'missing in action'. It turned out that it was *Ppor.* Krăstev's machine. Indeed, he continued to pursue a bomber and attack it repeatedly. Finally, his target started to smoke and lose height, disappearing in clouds. In the hot pursuit, the Bulgarian pilot reached the airspace of Skopje, located in the south-western corner of the country. After breaking fight, he took course to the north, but soon lost orientation. Finishing up his fuel, he belly-landed near Ferdinand. Indeed, a German report lists Bf 109G-2 (W.Nr. 14792) as damaged 50% that day¹⁵. This had to be Krăstev's mount, 'Green 4' (23/7057). Fact is, W.Nr. 14792 is listed in German records as being replaced by another Bf 109G-2 (W.Nr. 14561) on 3.09.1943.

As detailed earlier, one of the *Strelas* that landed safely – 'Green 6', flown by *Ppor.* Bochev – had two bullet holes in the port elevator, while another bullet punctured his fuel tank, but caused no fire, or leak, as the hole was instantly sealed by the tank's rubber coating. The rest escaped the mêlée unscathed.

After assessing the victory claim reports filed by the airmen, the following official result was eventually declared:

- *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov: one 'Liberator' shot out of formation, crashed near Trăn (3 points); one 'Liberator' attacked efficiently, started to smoke heavily and left formation (2 points).
- *Podporuchik* Ivan Bonev: one 'Liberator' shot out of formation, crashed at Karakash, near Trăn (3 points); one 'Liberator' attacked efficiently, started to smoke heavily and left formation (2 points).
- *Podporuchik* Hristo Krăstev: one 'Liberator' shot out of formation, crashed at Vladichin Han (3 points)¹⁶.
- *Podporuchik* Petăr Bochev: one 'Liberator' shot out of formation, crashed near Slivnitsa (3 points).

¹⁵ Reference to W.Nr. 14792, sent for repair to Rumania were found by the author in an undated Bulgarian report of Bf 109Es and Gs sent to ASAM-Pipera. The author also found the same *Werknummer* in Rumanian military archives in 2007, among the aircraft handled by the German mission at ASAM (without note that they were actually Bulgarian), in a document dated 27.09.1943. This combat loss was replaced by the Germans with W.Nr. 14561 on 3.09.1943. Eventually, W.Nr. 14792 must have returned to Bulgaria, as it was transferred to Yugoslavia after the war. Currently is preserved in the aviation museum in Belgrade, with YAF number 9663, 'White 63'.

¹⁶ It's interesting how could Krăstev, flying alone, be officially credited with a downed aircraft when there were no witnesses to the 'kill'.



Generally, it's rather difficult to match victory claims against actual losses. Usually, detailed description, linked with precise location and time of the victory claims and losses are lacking. Crews at the receiving end tend to credit their demise to technical fault or other causes, or even anti-aircraft fire – all these regarded as unavoidable events – rather to the direct action of enemy fighters, their skilled pilots. In this particular instance it's not otherwise. Nonetheless, the author attempted to match victory claims with losses, with the aforementioned caveat.

For 1 August, we have five air victory claims filed by Stoyanov and his men, while the sixth one – Stoyanov reports – was not claimed. Eventually, four were officially confirmed as shot down, two other ones as damaged. Four bombers actually crashed on Bulgarian soil: near Tsaribrod, at Suva Morava (5 km from Vladichin Han), as well as at Kokartsi Mahala and Karakash Mahala (both located near Trăn). Another four 'Liberators' crashed further on south-west, in the direction of their home base. However, not all bomber losses were to fighters, thus not all victory claims are actually valid. Of all the B-24 losses only two are listed by official US reports as in Bulgaria¹⁷, the location of the other lost bombers is given simply as "over the Ionian Sea, on the return flight".

We have photographic evidence of a B-24D broken apart [Stoyanov proudly taking a pose in front of a starboard wing, wrongly identified as of 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' (port side)/'The Pink Elephant' (starboard side)¹⁸], actually 'The Witch', and the same one belly landed¹⁹. The former 'Liberator' (B-24D, S/N 42-40364) was the first US warplane to be knocked out of the sky over Bulgaria, by Bochev. All crewmembers perished except for the tail gunner, who miraculously escaped the doomed bomber engulfed in flames, reaching the ground badly burned²⁰. The latter 'Liberator' (B-24D, S/N 41-11840), which fell minutes after its squadron buddy, which had attempted to defend it from marauding Bulgarian fighters, was most probably downed by Krăstev. It belly landed near the border, with no loss in life. Six crewmembers were quickly taken prisoner by Bulgarian border guards, while four airmen managed to escape across the border, into the mountains of occupied Yugoslavia. Eventually, they linked up with local partisans and stayed with them for almost a year before being repatriated.

Two other B-24Ds were also lost over Bulgaria, officially (by USAAF annals) after a mid-air collision ('Exterminator', S/N 41-23717, and 'Let'er Rip', S/N 41-24121), both crashing near Trăn²¹. Only three airmen of the twenty-two survived. However, it's hard to exclude enemy interference as the actual cause

This somewhat blurry original photo reveals the second known occurrence of a white air victory bar being applied on the top of yellow painted rudder, just like on Stoyanov's mount, 'Green 1'. Unfortunately, the white numbers inscribed in the black triangle are illegible, thus the identity of this unlucky 'Strela', No. 6 edged in white, cannot be positively ascertained. Had we not known the master photo of Bochev's 'Green 6', featured in the colour profile section (see page 126), we would be tempted to identify this wreck as Bochev's (the victory bar would match his victory obtained on 1 August 1943); however, the green number on that particular aircraft, at that date, was outlined in dark green, not white. Nevertheless, there is a remote possibility that the green board number was later drawn around in white, to match Stoyanov's. Unfortunately, the Author has no information of the eventual fate of NN 25/7057 Bochev often flew, which would confirm, or disprove, this theory.

17 US wartime reports (and maps) tend to regard the pre-war borders of a certain country as valid, even though they had changed due to various treaties and conquests. Accordingly, the south-western area of the so-called 'Greater Bulgaria' (i.e., Macedonia) was still regarded by the US military as 'Yugoslavia' (even though that country practically ceased to exist in April 1941).

18 Some sources describe the B-24D shot down over Bulgaria during withdrawal from the Ploëști air raid of 1 August 1943 as being 'Prince Charming', S/N 42-40082, but this is not true. 'Prince Charming', flown by Cpt. Thomas W. Bennett, turned back early, in the vicinity of Corfu and did not even reach the target area.

19 Stoyanov recalls in his memoirs that the body of one of the 'Liberators' was cut in four parts and transported to Bozhurishte on four railway platforms. On the port side of the nose, it had a painting of a laughing witch with a bomb and her hand pointing to the ground (obviously, this must have been 'The Witch'). He also writes that a bomb figure was painted on the nose 53 times, showing the number of combat sorties the bomber had performed.

20 Stoyanov confirms in his memoirs that the tail gunner of Bochev's victim was the only one saved by parachute, the rest of the crew perished. This first American POW to the Bulgarians, Staff Serg. Stanley M. Horine Jr., was captive for a record 422 days!

21 US sources usually pinpoint the crash location to 4 km north-east of Razgrad, which cannot be, as Razgrad is located in north-eastern Bulgaria, very far from the crash locations.

Another blurry original photo depicts another destroyed 'Strela' G. Unfortunately, again, there is nothing written on the verso of the print that could assist in identifying the catastrophic event and the aircraft involved in it. The yellow painted salvage truck is already at the grim scene.



of their demise, because the crash area matched the area patrolled by the Bulgarian '109s. It can be safely ascertained that these were the victims of Stoyanov and his wingman, Bonev.

The other four lost 'Liberators' all exited Bulgarian airspace before crashing. They were: 'Maternity Ward' (S/N 42-40663; 8 KIA, 2 POW), 'Cornhusker' (S/N 42-40322; all 10 KIA), 'Available Jones' (S/N 42-40780, 9 POW in Italy), 'Jo-Jo's Special Delivery/Hare's to Ya' (S/N 41-24230, all 11 KIA). It is difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of these crashes. Some of them were probably attacked by the other Bf 109G *dvoyka*, led by Krăstev, close to the border area, that is why their crash location is outside Bulgaria. It is believed 'Cornhusker' was first damaged by Avia B.534s over Bulgaria, then finished off by *Luftwaffe* fighters over the Ionian Sea. In fact, the *Luftwaffe*'s IV./JG 27, stationed in Greece, claimed five B-24s that day. One of them, 'Jo-Jo's Special Delivery/Hare's to Ya', is widely credited to *Leutnant* Hans Flor of Stab IV./JG 27. Other *Luftwaffe* pilots may have given the *coup de grâce* to other bombers already damaged over Bulgaria, or Rumania, or both²².

Despite the actual number of 'Liberators' certainly shot down by Bulgarian Bf 109s, that particular day – remembered by US military history as 'Black Sunday' – was a resounding success for the rather inexperienced Bulgarian fighter pilots who achieved the first air-to-air 'kills' of World War Two.

On 8 August, Tsar Boris III summoned to his palace in Sofia the two senior officers who took part in the victorious air battle, *Poruchik* Stoyanov and *Podporuchik* Bochev, as well as the commanding officer of the Avia B.534-equipped 612. *Yato*, 1/6. *Orlyak*, *Poruchik* Marin Petrov, who took also part in the epic air battle. Both Bf 109G pilots²³ were decorated by the Bulgarian monarch with the 'Order of Bravery', 4th Grade, 2nd Class. The third victor, *Podporuchik* Bonev, was not present at the Palace, that is why he received his 'Order of Bravery' later, from the Air Force commander, *General-Mahyor* Ayryanov. Curiously, *Podporuchik* Hristo Krăstev is not known to be decorated, despite being also officially credited with a confirmed 'kill'. Bulgaria's monarch would suddenly die of 'heart attack' only 20 days later.

On 22 September, *Reichsmarschall* Göring signed the award letter of the Iron Cross 2nd Class assigned to the four victorious Bulgarian fighter pilots, which was ceremoniously handed over to them through the IIIrd Reich's Embassy in Sofia, while the decoration was already pinned on the officers' chests by *Oberst* von Schönebeck, on 8 August, based on the fighter unit's combat diary.

No further enemy air intrusions happened in the few months to come. This lull offered a chance for the fighter defence of Sofia to be improved. The obsolete Avia B.534s were finally replaced by Bf 109Gs, as originally planned, but not executed in time. Accordingly, 3/6. *Orlyak* was ordered on 9 August to move two of its *yato* from Karlovo main air base closer to the capital, to Bozhurishte airfield. Consequently, the staff, 682. and 692. *Yato* and the larger part of the 3/6. *Orlyak*'s *rota* (the soldiers' army company) departed on the 12th, leaving behind the 672. *Yato* (its personnel consisting of the commanding officer, nine officer pilots and three NCO pilots, all *Feldfebel*s). They followed their colleagues to Bozhurishte on 23 September. 672. *Yato* commander, *Por.* Nikolay Yordanov, landed on Bozhurishte with an *Emil*. Ground crew arrived at the new base as well. The relocation of 3/6. *Orlyak* – the spearhead of Bulgarian fighter aviation – concluded. This way, the capital was now defended by the best the Bulgarians could muster.

There is only one word written on the rear side of this original photo: 'Sasho'. Based on the identification of late veteran fighter pilot Atanas Matev, the pilot is *Feldfebel* 'Sasho' Haralampiev.



22 I.A.R. 81 pilot *Adjutant șef aviator* Dumitru Ilie of *Grupul 6 vânătoare* (6th Fighter Group) claimed two B-24s south of Danube, the natural border between Rumania and Bulgaria.

23 If *Por.* Petrov was decorated as well is uncertain, but most probably was, otherwise he would have not been summoned by the Monarch at the same time with the other two officers.



Two Feldfebel (the NCO rank is easily recognisable by the brass belt buckle featuring a winged propeller topped with a crown) are casually leaning against Bf 109G-2, Green 5. The pilot at right is 'Sasho' Haralampiev, while the one at left is Atanas Matev. The rudder was painted in yellow, which covered the factory-applied Bulgarian tricolour. Apparently, the yellow paint was of either bad quality, or not suitable for fabric, as it peeled off excessively. Of special interest are the service texts in Bulgarian language, clearly seen on this original photo. This particular aircraft was written off on 12 June 1944.

Even if this 'Gustav' is well camouflaged against the enemy's preying eyes, its identity can be ascertained, thanks to the individual serial number visible on the fuselage: 'Green 1' outlined in white, as well as the white vertical victory bar painted on the top rudder. All these details identify it as the personal mount of Podporuchik Stoyan Stoyanov, commanding officer of the 682. Yato, in 1943.



Two photos taken in front of a Bf 109G-2 during the winter of 1943/1944. The aircraft sports highly interesting camouflage scheme on its starboard (but not on the port) wing. Apparently, the original RLM 74/75 grey factory camouflage scheme was oversprayed with a dark coloured wavy line, believed to be dark green. The five Messerschmitt pilots are, from left: Podporuchik Ivan N. Bonev (5th ranking top pilot with 8 points), Poruchik Dimităr P. Vuychev, Podporuchik Stoyan I. Stoyanov (top scoring 'ace' pilot, in centre, with pilot's goggles over his leather helmet), Feldfebel Yoto P. Kamenov (one point) and Podporuchik Ivan Demirov. They all wear German-origin pilot's apparel. On the other photo, behind the two kneeling airmen, a group of ground crewmen gathered for a memory shot.



Fighter commanders. From left to right: Kpt. Rusi Rusev, Commanding Officer of 1/6. Iztrebiteľen Orlyak at Karlovo, Kpt. Krăstyu Atanasov, Commanding Officer of 3/6. Iztrebiteľen Orlyak at Bozhurishte and Por. Stoyan Stoyanov, Commanding Officer of 682. Iztrebiteľno Yato of 3/6. Iztrebiteľen Orlyak.



Beside the already planned relocation, the VNJV HQ made several other changes as result of 'Operation Tidal Wave'. One of these changes was to station two Messerschmitt Bf 109s at Skopje, Macedonia, in the south-western corner of wartime Bulgaria, with the hope that it would allow early intercepts of Allied aircraft while they were en-route to targets in Bulgaria, or Rumania. At the time Skopje was already the main airfield used by the VNJV in Macedonia, where a variety of light bombers and reconnaissance aircraft had been stationed to support army operations against the growing Yugoslav partisan movement²⁴. However, the relocation of these Messerschmitt 'gate guards' would not take place until 19 October 1943, in the form of two older Bf 109Es. Additionally to the VNJV, elements of a *Luftwaffe* fighter group, IV./JG 27, also moved to Skopje, on 6 December 1943. This was the first *Luftwaffe* fighter unit to be stationed for a substantial time (thus not in transit) in wartime Bulgaria²⁵.

The next squadron to receive Bf 109G-2s was the 672. Yato, also part of 3/6. Orlyak (squadron colour white). It was during transition training of the pilots of this squadron when the first deadly accident happened. On 9 August 1943, the Bf 109G-2, NN 38/7057 (W.Nr. 14803, engine DB 605A, No. 35670), flown by Podporuchik Luka Y. Obreykov crashed near Pirdop, killing the pilot²⁶. Reportedly, he was in bad health for a while. During the flight, Obreykov opened the cockpit canopy and attempted to bail out. However, he lost consciousness and crashed to his death.

24 There was a small Bulgarian flight school (12 trainees) reported at Skopje-East, operated by *Luftwaffe* instructors, in September 1943.

25 Earlier, *Fliegerhorst-Kommandantur* (Airfield Command) E 72/XI moved to Skopje-East in September 1943, to prepare the air base for the arrival of *Luftwaffe* warplanes.

26 Bulgarian printed and internet sources erroneously claim that Obreykov was the first fighter pilot to lose his life in air combat, during the defence of Bulgarian airspace. His date of death is also usually given, erroneously, on 8 August 1943. At neither date air combat took place, only an aerial interception of what turned out to be a 'friendly' target.



Left: Colourised formal portrait photo of Poruchik Dimităr Spisarevski. One can observe the German pilot's badge on the left side of his tunic, underneath the Bulgarian one.

Right: Colourised formal portrait photo of another 3/6 Orlyak pilot fallen on the same day as Spisarevski: Podporuchik Georgi Kyumyurdzhiev.

The combat diary of 3/6. *Orlyak* (compiled in the immediate post war era) gives a different date for the catastrophe: 6 August. It describes the circumstances leading to the airman's death as follows: an unknown airplane was observed over the airfield, and the 'dezhurna dvojka' (i.e., pair on duty), manned by Ppor. Obreykov and Ppor. Pavlov, was ordered by the commander to take off to identify it at 14:20. The diary briefly states that the pair separated during flight and Obreykov died in the process, without giving any details. Pavlov identified the unknown aircraft as Italian and returned to the base safely. On 7 August – the diary continues – only ten pilots were available at the base, the rest having gone to attend the funeral of Obreykov²⁷.

Number of combat-ready aircraft and aircrew available to 3/6. *Orlyak* in the first half of August 1943*:

| Date | 1.08 | 2.08 | 3.08 | 4.08 | 5.08 | 7.08 | 8.08 | 9.08 | 11.08 | 12.08 | 16.08 |
|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Aircraft | 10 | 9 | 14 | 17 | 18 | 17 | 17 | 18 | 17 | 17 | 17 |
| Aircrew | 11 | 30 | 31 | 31 | 31 | 10 | 29 | 30 | 30 | 17 | 18 |

*only those dates are listed when there was a change in the numbers

The three-month lull in combat activity did not go without incident. Accidents and incidents occasionally occurred. On 22 September, during a planned test flight to check the engine of aircraft No. 3 (no colour is given in the combat diary), *Podporuchik* Kiril Hristov Iliev turned the airplane on its back during take-off. The pilot was unharmed, the aircraft damaged, repairable. On 1 October – the day when five pilots departed to Rumania to take over new aircraft – two 'special events' happened: *Podporuchik* Georgi Kyumyurdzhiev landed at too high a speed and crashed his *Strela*. *Feldfebel* Hristo Takev somersaulted the *Strela* he was flying. Neither pilots was injured, both aircraft were damaged. Six days later, the pilots who went to Rumania to pick up '109s returned home. One of them, *Feldfebel* Yordan Todorov, miscalculated his range and had to force land south-west of the airfield due to fuel starvation. The pilot escaped uninjured, but the bellied freshly repaired aircraft was slightly damaged.

In the meantime, further Bf 109G-2s had been delivered. Following the initial batch of 16 aircraft, three G-2s were handed over on 11.06.1943 as replacement for the similar number of Bf 109Es lost in accidents. Two more arrived on 29.07.1943, being followed by a dozen, handed over in September and October. All these were repaired G-2s, refurbished at the main east European Messerschmitt Bf 109 repair centre of ASAM Pipera, located near Bucharest (Rumania). The 3/6. *Orlyak* combat diary mentions that on 23 October Ppor. Bonev landed at Bozhurishte with a new aircraft brought from Romania, while two days later, it was the turn of Ppor. Disov to land, at 14:20, with a new aircraft coming from Bucharest.

A letter by RLM *Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe*, dated 5 October 1943, instructed Messerschmitt AG in Berlin, W 35, to earmark 12 Bf 109G-2s from the stocks ("aus den Beständen") of I./JG 4 for delivery to Bulgaria. Concomitantly, the request for five sets of underwing gondolas (fitted with 2 cm MG 151/20 cannon), suitable for the G-2 (identified as G-2/R6 heavy fighter), was turned down.

²⁷ Mentioned in the combat diary as "Obriykov".

The last squadron of the 3/6. *Orlyak* to convert to the Bf 109G was the 692. *Yato* (unit colour red). They finished conversion training by the end of the year. The fighter group's six-aircraft staff unit (called *shtab*) – unit colour yellow – was also re-equipped with Bf 109Gs, and finished training at an unspecified date in the autumn of 1943. Thus, by the end of the year, the entire 3/6. *Orlyak* was mastering the Bf 109G – the top wartime fighter aircraft type the Bulgarians flew.

An air force document, written by hand²⁸, dated 11 September 1943, lists the pilots available to the, still incomplete, 3/6. *Orlyak* [text in square and round brackets added by the Author]:

Order of Battle of 3/6. *Iztrebitelen Orlyak* [Fighter Group] on 11 September 1943

Shtab na orlyaka (Group Staff)

Kpt. [Chudomir M.] Toplodolski (Group Commanding Officer)

Por. [Dimităr S.] Spisarevski – posted to Germany

Ppor. [Mihail K.] Banov – posted to Germany

672. *Yato* (672nd Squadron)

Ppor. [Boris V.] Damev (Squadron Commanding Officer) – at Karlovo

Ppor. [Marin A.] Tsvētkov – at Karlovo

Ppor. [Pavel E.] Pavlov – at Karlovo

Feldf. Stefanov [?, perhaps ex-*Podof.* Stefan N. Stefanov] – banned from flight for 45 days

Podof. [Radoslav D.] Raykov – transferred to Sh.Z.O.¹

682. *Yato* (682nd Squadron)

Por. [Stoyan I.] Stoyanov (Squadron Commanding Officer) – sick leave for 30 days

Podof. Slavkov [?, perhaps Stefan A. Slavov, no rank known] – in hospital following an accident

692. *Yato* (692nd Squadron)

Ppor. [Ivan T.] Stefanov (Squadron Commanding Officer) – at Karlovo

Feldf. [Dako P.] Dakov – transferred to Sh.Z.O.

Feldf. [Tsvetan D.] Gruev – transferred to Sh.Z.O.

Feldf. [Hristo] Tsankov [Koev] – unfit to fly

Feldf. Manev [?, no matching name found] – [illegible] due to weak nerves

Pilot roster:

| Unit: | Staff | 672 | 689 | 692 | Total |
|-------------------------|-------|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Theoretical (officers): | 3 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 21 |
| Theoretical (NCOs): | 0 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 13 |
| Extant (off.+NCOs): | 2+0 | 3+2 | 1+1 | 1+4 | 7+7 |
| Difference (needed): | 1+0 | 3+2 | 5+4 | 5+0 | 14+6 |

Notes [in the original document]:

- 1, Five Bf 109G-2s are located at Bucharest “ready to be ferried” [to Bulgaria]. Pilots are there, ready for the ferry flight in the first day with nice weather.
- 2, With these [five additional aircraft], the *orlyak* (group) will have a total of 25 aircraft available.

1 Sh.Z.O. means ‘*Shkola za Zapasni Ofitseri*’, i.e., School of Officers in Reserve, originally located in Knyazhevo (today a district of Sofia). Later, the school moved to Sofia, in the buildings of the former Arsenal (nowadays the Museum of People and Earth). For a brief period, the ShZO was located in Radomir, before moving to Sofia. It was an annex to the ‘Military Academy’. This abridged military school was created with the purpose of improving the flight and tactical skills of experienced NCO airmen (*podofitseri*, *felfebels*, etc.), then to promote the successful cadets to the officer rank. After completing the quick-paced courses, the graduates – who wore the *Shkolnik* addendum while attending school – were elevated in rank, to *Podponuchik* (2nd Lt.), but with the note of ‘*Zapasni ofitser*’, i.e., officer in reserve. This interim rank was intended only to be in use while the war lasted, as after hostilities would have ceased, these reserve officers would have returned to civilian life. See also footnote in the Avia B.534 ‘Dogan’ chapter about the ‘*Zamestnik ofitser*’ (Warrant Officer) rank.

[Note by the Author: from the above pilots’ statistics it’s clear there was an urgent need for officers and NCOs, to complete the existing gap in manpower. The theoretical strength of a VNVV fighter group consisted of 40 pilots (four in the staff unit and twelve in each of the three squadrons) and 54 fighter aircraft (4, plus 2 in reserve, in the staff unit and 12, plus 4 in reserve, for each fighter squadron). This theoretical strength was never achieved, though]

28 Many thanks to Jaroslav Kreč for facilitating the translation of the hand written document, which the Author could not handle.



Fragment from what is believed to be Spisarevski's doomed 'Strela', Yellow 2, found on a hillside close to the village of Dolni Pasarel, in the early 2000s.

According to Bulgarian sources, a total of 46 Bf 109Gs were transferred to Bulgaria by the end of 1943. German sources give only 36 G-2 aircraft handed over to Bulgaria²⁹. The author found a similar number (38) Bf 109G-2s (including replacements) with known W.Nr. that were handed over by the Germans that year – a clearly insufficient number to equip a whole fighter group (needed theoretical quantity of 54 aircraft: 3x16+6 pcs.). One possibility is that the Bulgarians flew borrowed *Luftwaffe* aircraft – sometime depicted in photos taken in Bulgaria and mentioned in logbooks – which were then returned when enough aircraft arrived as regular transfer.

The German side of the Messerschmitt repair workshop at Pipera-Bucharest, Rumania (called A.S.A.M.), reported the following two Bf 109G-2s and their engines repaired over there during 1943/1944: airframe W.Nr. 14792 and 13517, engine W.Nr. 76321 and 26754. Based on the list of Bf 109Gs handed over to Bulgaria and accident reports, these *Strela* are Nos. 23/7057 (damaged in combat on 1 August 1943) and 36/7057 (damaged in landing accident on 19 July 1943 – see appropriate colour profile).

Number of combat-ready aircraft and aircrew available to 3/6. *Orlyak* in December 1943*:

| Date | 1.12 | 10.12 | 12.12 | 18.12 | 19.12 | 20.12 | 21.12 |
|----------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Aircraft | 18 | 17 | 19 | 21 | 20 | 16 | 13 |
| Aircrew | 20 | 20 | 20 | 22 | 22 | 20 | 18 |

*only those dates are listed when there was a change in the numbers

One of the seasoned Bulgarian pilots, who transitioned to the Bf 109G in mid-January 1944, *Podporuchik* Stefan Marinopolski³⁰, who had previously flown the French Dewoitine D.520 fighter, recalled: "As I sat in the cabin of the Me 109 G-6 for the first time, I immediately felt that this is a completely different class of aircraft. Everything was clear and easy to use. The cockpit was relatively tight, but I had the

29 *Strela* No. 54 (most probably a G-2) – thus the 35th *Gustav* – was officially written off on 20 December 1943.

30 The flamboyant Stefan Marinopolski, called 'Marnata', had a very eventful and tumultuous life. After the war's end, he was posted to Balchik, where he took command of a fighter *yato* equipped with the new Soviet fighter, the Yak-9M. However, he was fired from the air force like most of his 'royalist' colleagues and arrested on 4 July 1946, on charges of "preparing escape of pilots". He was detained until 29 September 1947. After his release from prison, he was employed as a factory machinist. Married in March 1950. Arrested again on 19 December 1950, as "enemy of the people." Released on 8 November 1952. By then, his wife had divorced him. Sent to Czechoslovakia as guest construction worker, managed to cross the fortified Czechoslovak-Austrian border illegally on 1 December 1957. From June 1959, worked for Radio 'Free Europe', for six years, preparing broadcast against the Communist Bulgarian government. In 1963, emigrated to the USA. After Communism's collapse in 1989, Marinopolski returned to Bulgaria. Remarried. Died on 30 September 2008, at the age of 87.

feeling of being part of the machine. When the engine started, I've got a sense of strength and security. The weapons were powerful and located very efficiently."

Once the first pilots of 672. *Yato* were deemed as ready for combat service, they started actual sorties, patrolling the skies of Bulgaria. Besides watching for incoming enemy airplanes, Bulgarian pilots also had to support ground units fighting Communist partisans. The combat diary of 3/6. *Orlyak* records one such combat mission. On 10 October 1943, the squadron had a record number of 16 serviceable Bf 109G-2s, along with an equal number of pilots. That day, a 692. *Yato chetvorka*, led by *Poruchik* Petăr Bochev, comprising also of Kyumyurdzhiev, Dimitrov and Disov, took off at 16:05, with the order to strafe the positions held by partisans in the Kamena-Pirov region, where they had surrounded a Bulgarian border station. However, the mission could not be completed due the rough terrain, the setting sun and the fact that the location of friendly forces was not properly marked. Upon the arrival of the airplanes over the contested area, the 'bandits' – as referred to in the fighter group's combat diary – easily hid in the forests and between the rocks. The four *Strelas* landed in the dark, without having fired their guns.

The following list of pilots and aircraft available to the 3/6. *Orlyak* on an unspecified day in November 1943 was compiled post war by veteran fighter pilot Mihail Grigorov (published in his memoirs)³¹:

Order of Battle of 3/6. *Orlyak* in November 1943

Group Staff* (ID colour: Yellow)

Group Commanding Officer: *Kpt.* Chudomir Toplodolski

Group Adjutant Officer: *Ppor.* Hristo Kostakev

Group Chief Mechanic: *Kpt.* Hristofor Popov

Serviceable aircraft: 2

672. Fighter *Yato* (ID colour: White)

Squadron Commanding Officer: *Por.* Nikolay Yordanov

Pilots: Mihail Grigorov, Stefan Konzov, Marin Tsvëtkov, Stanush Stanushev, Radoslav Raykov, Mityu Disov

Chief mechanic: Stefan Tanev

Serviceable aircraft: 8

682. Fighter *Yato* (ID colour: Green)

Squadron Commanding Officer: *Por.* Stoyan Stoyanov

Pilots: Ivan Demirov, Ivan Bonev, Dimităr Vuychev, Yoto Kamenov, Nikola Kralichev, Hristo Hristov

Chief mechanic: Stoyan Tsantsev

Serviceable aircraft: 10

692. Fighter *Yato* (ID colour: Red)

Squadron Commanding Officer: *Por.* Lyuben Kondakov

Pilots: Gencho Dimitrov [Ivanov], Ivan Stefanov, Petăr Bochev, Hristo Tsankov [Koev], Georgi Kyumyurdzhiev, Tsviatko Zagorski, Tsvetan Gruev, Aleksandăr Petkovski, Kiril Iliev

Chief mechanic: Kosta Vasilev

Serviceable aircraft: 8

Total: 2+7+10=26 pilots and 2+8+10+8=28 fighter aircraft

*Notice the absence of *Por.* Dimităr Spisarevski, at that time temporarily assigned to administrative duty.

It has to be mentioned that at that time no *Luftwaffe* fighter units stationed in Bulgaria, as they were operating in other areas of the Balkans, where Allied air incursions represented real danger (occupied Yugoslavia, Rumania, Albania, Greece). Nonetheless, German fighters did occasionally land in Bulgaria, mainly in transit to the operational areas. During a ferry flight, Bf 109G-2 (W.Nr. 10356, BG+OL) of 2./Fl.ÜG 1 (Mitte) force landed near Bozhitsa, 13 km NNW of Bosilegrad, on 17 June 1943. The pilot, *Fw.* Adolf Kromer, died in the crash. He was the first German fighter pilot to lose his life on Bulgarian soil, albeit in an accident, not in combat. Another Messerschmitt fighter in transit, Bf 109G-6 Trop (W.Nr. 18786, PL+FK) of 2./Fl.ÜG 1 (Süd), crash landed due to engine trouble south of Varna on 7 August 1943, suffering 85% damage. Again, the pilot, *Fw.* Hans Thielow, lost his life in the crash. Finally, Bf 109G-6 (W.Nr. 18288, PP+TF), flown by *Oblt.* Potrawke of Stab/JG 27, developed engine trouble and had to force land south-west of Sofia on 10 September 1943. The pilot was injured, while the aircraft was a total write-off.

31 Mihail Grigorov: *Orli na Bălgariya. Zapiski na letetsa* (Eagles of Bulgaria. Notes of an airman), vol. 2 (titled: *Ogneno nebe*, i.e., Sky on Fire), published by Propeler, Sofia, 1999 (page 90).

Air Combat Starts. Fighter vs. Fighter, Man vs. Man

In late October 1943, the Allied Combined Chief of Staff suggested to General Eisenhower that Bulgaria should be given a “sharp lesson”; “the quickest way to promote resistance in Bulgaria and possibly to bring the country out of war [is] to open a large-scale bombing attack upon it.” Eisenhower accepted the suggestion. Accordingly, steps were made to plan and perform air raids against the Balkan country, particularly its capital, as soon as logistics permitted. These attacks were planned to demolish the myth of the ‘symbolic war’ and were chiefly aimed at destroying the morale of the population, with the end goal of convincing Bulgaria’s leaders to exit the Axis camp and sue for peace.

The first live scramble performed by the freshly trained Bulgarian Bf 109G pilots took place on 18 October. That day – Bulgarian reports state – at 12:15, 24 ‘Wellington’ [actually 36 B-25 ‘Mitchells’ of the 321st BG] light bombers, covered by ‘Lightning’ fighters [12 P-38s of the 82nd FG, 95th FS], bombed the area of the Skopie³² railway station. About 30 military and civilian people were killed, 23 wounded. Some 40 houses were destroyed, as well as four locomotives and many wagons. On the same day, at 13:35, ten enemy aircraft attacked Veles railway station. At 15:15, US fighters again attacked Veles, and fired their machine guns at the railway station and the barracks of the [Bulgarian] 56th Infantry Regiment. Two people were killed, one wounded. At 16:22, 14 ‘Lightnings’ again attacked Skopie railway station. Flying low, they were shooting at the station and dropped a few bombs as well. One Bulgarian and seven German soldiers were killed, two Germans and 13 Bulgarians wounded. Heavy machine guns from the 51st Infantry Regiment opened fire on the low-flying aircraft and shot down one of them. At ‘General Zhostovo’ railway station, a TNT storage depot detonated following a strafing attack.

The combat diary of 3/6. *Orlyak* lists some alarm flights. *Ppor.* Krāstev and *Podof.* Kamenov of the 682. *Yato* scrambled, looking for the enemy reportedly coming from the south-west. They spotted nothing and landed at 12:20. From the 672. *Yato* took off *Por.* Yordanov and *Feldf.* Stanushev, but they did not find anything either and landed at Skopie airfield. Over there, the alarm sounded at 15:30, the pair scrambled, but did not spot any enemy and landed home, at Bozhurishte.

Indeed, the first US air raid against wartime Bulgarian territory of the new bombing campaign was performed on 18 October 1943. That day, US sources report, XII Bomber Command B-25s, escorted by P-38s, raided Skopie marshalling yard – listed as ‘Yugoslavia’ in US documents, with good effect. The raid was completed unopposed in the air. One P-38 was lost (aircraft No. 43-2552, pilot 2nd Lt. John Homan Jr. of 97th FS, 82nd FG, killed, buried in a park in Skopie), most probably to ground fire. This matches the events described earlier from the Bulgarian side. Further missions were without incident.

According to the 3/6. *Orlyak* combat diary, on the 19th of October, a *dvoyka* from 682. *Yato*, manned by *Ppor.* Kyumyurdzhiev and *Feldf.* Kamenov, flew to Skopie to stay there. This marked the beginning of a permanent guard post in the south-western corner of the Bulgarian Kingdom (or Tsardom).

On 20 October, XII Bomber Command’s B-25 bombers [36 ‘Mitchells’ of the 321st BG], escorted by P-38 fighters [40 ‘Lightnings’ of the 95th, 96th and 97th FS, all of the 82nd FG], attacked the marshalling yard of Niš. Bulgarian sources record that at 13:06, 86 enemy aircraft attacked Niš. The damage inflicted was immense. Bombs fell on the railway station and on the barracks of the Bulgarian 66th Infantry Regiment. The nearby airfield was strafed. As a result, 14 locomotives were destroyed and 5 damaged, 112 wagons were destroyed and 79 damaged, 66 buildings were destroyed, 245 citizens were killed and 479 wounded. Additionally, two Bulgarian and two German aircraft were destroyed on the airfield.

The early warning service sent information about enemy aircraft approaching in the direction of Sofia at 12:50. Soon after, ten Bf 109Gs from the 3/6. *Orlyak*, based at Bozhurishte main air base, took off to intercept them. They approached Kyustendil and loitered over there waiting for the enemy. When ground control informed them about the real target, Niš, they changed course and flew north-west, towards the town lying about 150 km away. By the time the Bulgarians arrived it was too late, the Americans were gone, so the fighters returned to Bozhurishte empty handed.

The combat diary of 3/6. *Orlyak* reports the following: *Podporuchik* Mihail Grigorov was scheduled to fly to Skopie to strengthen the air interception pair



(Wikimedia)

Hptm. Wengel walks on the left side of the famous General der Jagdflieger Adolf Galland, smoking his ‘trademark’ cigar. On the far side, Oblt. Lothar Gerlach and Oblt. Gerd Senoner accompany them. All three officers escorting Galland were members of I./JG 5. Hptm. Wengel would die in air combat over Sofia, on 10 January 1944. A commemorative stone with a plaque was erected in his memory in a public area of Sofia (see above), in 2004 – a unique occurrence outside Germany for a fallen German soldier of WW 2. Since then, the memorial has been vandalised, but was repaired. Photo taken on Schwerin air base, in late 1943.



32 Note: Skopie, spelled as Skopje, is now the capital of the Republic of Macedonia, known also as FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Late edit: the new official name of the country is now “Republic of North Macedonia”).

Podporuchik Stefan Marinopolski poses with a tall Luftwaffe officer of I./JG 5, called Leutnant Heinrich Freiherr von Podewils, on Vrazhdebna (Sofia-East) airfield, in January 1944. The Bf 109G-6/R6, equipped with underwing cannon gondolas, belonged to the Geschwaderadjutant. Notice that the German 'Gustav' does not have a yellow rear fuselage ring.



Another view of the same Kanonen Gustav, with Leutnant Heinrich Freiherr von Podewils in front of it. Notice that the fighter does not have a white spiral on its spinner.



located there, but meanwhile the alarm was sounded. At 12:50, the serviceable *Strelas* of the *orlyak*, led by Por. Nikola Yordanov, took off. While over Kyustendil, they received information that Nish was being attacked. The fighters turned towards the line Pirot-Nish, but found nothing, and returned home, to Bozhurishte, at 13:50. At Skopie, Kyumyurdzhiev and Kamenov took off twice; however, bad communication and poor air warning system resulted in them not meeting the enemy.

Next day, at 12:40, a lone Bf 109G took off from Bozhurishte to intercept a reconnaissance P-38 spotted over Sofia, flying at great height. The Bulgarian pilot, *Podpor.* Kiril Iliev of the 692. *Yato*, discovered the enemy, but could not reach it. There were no further intrusions in Bulgarian airspace during October.

The Bulgarian Bf 109G pilots' first actual encounter with enemy fighters³³ happened on 14 November 1943, a Sunday³⁴. That was the real test for Bulgarian pilots, against a real enemy; fighter against

33 Bulgarian Bf 109E pilots based on Skopie did clash previously with USAAF fighters (P-38 'Lightnings') earlier, on 21 October 1943 (see appropriate chapter).

34 The mission originally scheduled for the previous day, 13 November, planned to involve 144 B-25s, was cancelled at the last minute.



Flying personnel of a yato (believed to be the 652nd) belonging to 2/6. Orlyak pose for a group shot in front of a newly delivered Bf 109G-6, sometime in the spring of 1944. Orlyak commander Kapitan Asen D. Kovachev is in the centre, flanked by his men, including Bonchev (at his right), Marinopolski (at his right, in the back row) and Atanasov (second from his left, in the back row). Notice the 'Strela', White 2, in the background of the top photo, at right.

The same group of pilots now pose crowded at the nose section of one of the yato's 'Strelas'. Notice the lack of white spiral from the propeller cone. Instead, it wears original factory scheme of 1/3rd white and 2/3rd black green segment.

A couple of Luftwaffe Bf 109Gs, believed to be parked on a Bulgarian airfield in 1944. The underwing gondolas, housing a 20 mm (2 cm) cannon each, identify the aircraft as Bf 109G-6/R6 'heavy fighter', employed specifically to combat the American heavy bombers, which often intruded Bulgarian airspace throughout 1944. The horizontal bar seen on the rear fuselage denotes that the aircraft belonged to the IInd Gruppe, which narrows the identification to either II./JG 51, or II./JG 301. If so, the airfield was either Radomir, or Vrazhdebna, located in the vicinity of Sofia. Notice the yellow Axis identification markings, applied on the engine cowling undersurface, lower wingtips, rudder, and the conspicuous absence of the rear fuselage ring – all in line with the way Bulgarian warplanes were identified. This Jagdgruppe was the last Luftwaffe fighter unit to vacate the area covered by the book, in September 1944.

fighter, man against man. That Sunday morning, forty-eight P-38 'Lightnings' of the 82nd Fighter Group (FG) took off from their base at Lecce, Italy. Over the Adriatic Sea, the 'Lightning' pilots met up with 48 B-25 'Mitchells' of the 321st Bomber Group (BG) and 48 B-25 'Mitchells' of the 340th Bomber Group, and provided them with escort to the intended target of the day, which was to be the marshalling yards of Sofia. Once again, the *Luftwaffe* early warning radar units³⁵ were able to detect the approaching formation and alerted the VNVV fighter units. However, the alert was received late, only when the American formation was already entering Bulgarian airspace³⁶.

With 2/6. *Orlyak* grounded due to unpreparedness, exacerbated by faulty and contradictory orders coming from the VNVV HQ, the defence of Sofia would fall entirely on the shoulders of the 3/6. *Orlyak*. 13 Bf 109Gs were available that day on Bozhurishte air base, complemented by a pair of Bf 109Es based at Skopie. All were scrambled upon learning about the incoming enemy raid at 12:25, just minutes before the first bombs hit Sofia. After take-off, the Bf 109G flown by *Feldfebel* Nikola Kralichev could not retract one of the main undercarriage legs. Despite this, the pilot pressed on with the sortie and headed towards the target with his slightly incapacitated fighter, determined to fight along his comrades.

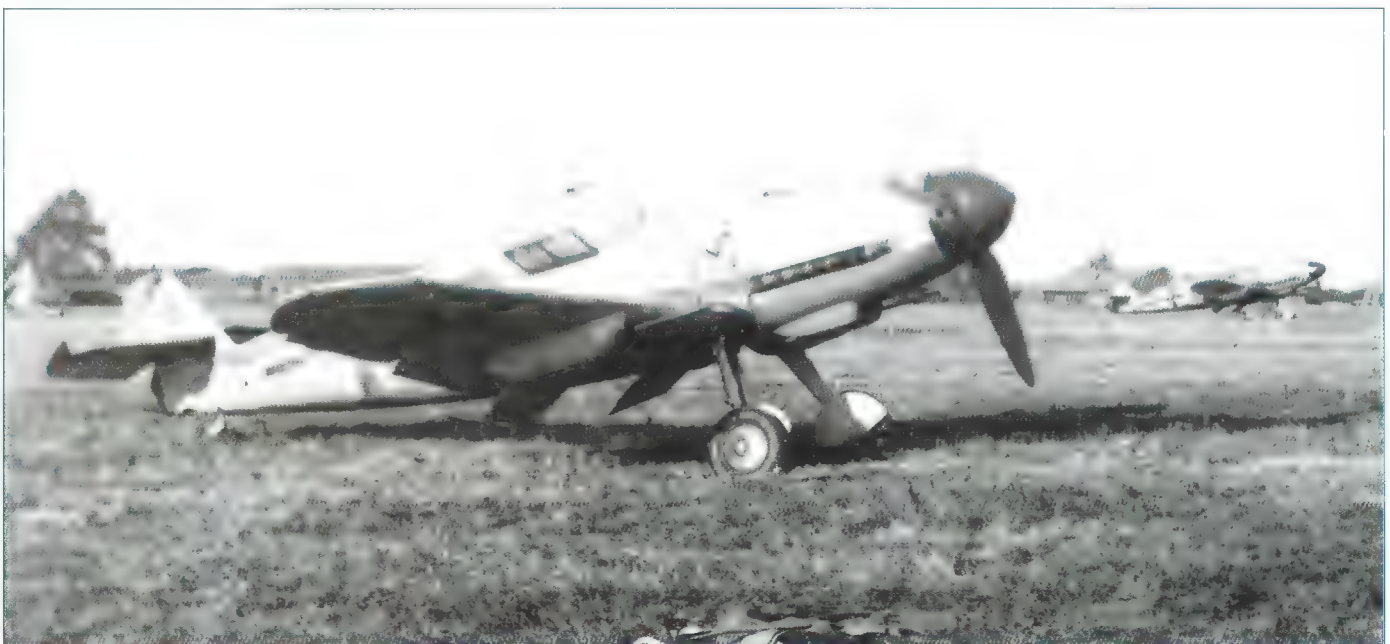
The Messerschmitts arrived at the zone just as the B-25s were clearing Sofia airspace after pounding the marshalling yard and heading home. With the P-38s of the 82nd FG forming a protective umbrella over the B-25s, the Bulgarian pilots from the 3/6. *Orlyak* began to manoeuvre their Bf 109Gs in order to gain the best advantage over the intruders. They kept climbing, in an effort to use the cloud cover above the American formations to help conceal their planned attack.

After placing their fighters above the enemy formations, the thirteen Bulgarian pilots, inexperienced in real air combat, proceeded to making diving attacks on the P-38s and B-25s cruising below, individually and in pairs. Due to the overwhelming number of escort fighters, as the Bulgarians made their runs, they were quickly confronted by the P-38s. To evade the twin-engine US fighters they had not encountered before, the Bulgarian pilots tried to either gain altitude and climb back into the cloud cover, or to fly low, 'on the deck', in an effort to disappear from the enemy's prying sight. While these tactics saved some Bulgarian pilots from being shot down, three Messerschmitts were recorded as being lost, however.

Early in the battle – details the combat diary of 3/6. *Orlyak* – *Feldfebel* Nikola Kralichev, who was flying his fighter with one leg extended, managed to get close to a P-38 and fire effectively at one of the engines.

35 The following seven fixed German radar stations (using *Freya F* and *Freya LZ* radar systems) were active in Bulgaria, starting from mid-1943: Chibaovtsi village (ca. 30 km north of Sofia), Devetaki village (near Lovech), Hissar, Sliven, Razgrad, Kichevo village (near Varna) and Kableshkovo village (near Pomorie). Additionally, a mobile station was located in Gorna Oryahovitsa, covering the Pleven-Varna railway line.

36 Due to delays in the relaying of information on raiding allied aircraft from the *Luftwaffe* plotter stations located in Yugoslavia and Greece, it was not uncommon for Bulgarian fighters to receive word of an incoming bomber formation just as it was nearing its intended target. This would be a problem that would hinder the Bulgarian fighter defence throughout the war, making successful intercepts of American formations attacking Bulgarian targets difficult. In fact, it was far more common for Bulgarian fighter pilots to arrive as the formations of allied warplanes were completing their bombing runs, or when they were already heading to their home bases.





A B-24 'Liberator' is depicted over burning Sofia, during a bombing run in early 1944. Following intense research and digital analysis of the nose art seen on the photo, it has been determined that the words on the nose of this particular 'Liberator' are most probably 'Angie the Ox'. Accordingly, the depicted bomber is B-24D, S/N 41-24031, of the 515th Bomber Squadron, 376th Bomber Group (the tail marking is also consistent with this particular group). The 376th BG targeted Bulgaria repeatedly, and lost at least ten of its 'Liberators' in the process (only one of them, 'Big Nig', was of the 515th BS), victims of the local air defence. Of those bombers' crews, 13 men were KIA, 8 MIA and 82 POW to the Bulgarians. Based on a period map of the city, in the centre of the photograph, covered by smoke, the marshalling yard – the probable target – is located. During such bomb runs usually not only the official target was hit, but civilian housings as well, sometime more than a kilometre away from the target, causing hundreds of casualties among civilian population. In the lower left corner, the 'Yunak' Stadium can be seen, along with a racetrack.

Reportedly, the engine exploded and stopped, forcing the American to break combat and retreat. Indeed, 2nd Lieutenant Roy Hurst of the 95th FS lost an engine over Sofia during the battle, and was forced to retire early in the fight. On the return flight over Yugoslavia, Lt. Hurst and his P-38G (S/N 42-13238) became separated from the rest of the 82nd FG pilots in some cloud cover and was not seen again. Despite the after-battle report, the P-38 was not awarded as a victory of *Feldfebel* Kralichev, but rather to *Podporuchik* Mihail Grigorov, a Bf 109E pilot based at Skopje, who claimed a 'Lightning' in the Debăr region (most probably both men fired on the same aircraft, at separate locations and times, which was a common occurrence in prolonged air combats).

Just seconds after scoring hits on one of the pursued 'Lightnings' Allison engines, the radiator of the '109 of *Feldfebel* Nikola Kralichev was punctured by bullets fired by another 'Lightning' pilot, who tried to protect his colleague. With overheating powerplant, Kralichev was forced to land close to Petărč, near Sofia. The Bf 109 was most probably damaged by the P-38 of Captain Charles Spencer of the 97th FS. Cpt. Spencer reported that he gave chase to a Messerschmitt 'Me 109' outside Sofia, and watched it crash into the ground. Whatever the case, Kralichev was able to walk away unhurt.

The combat diary of 3/6. *Orlyak* also mentions that *Podporuchik* Petăr Bochev set one of the engines of a 'Mitchell' on fire. Soon after, he repeated the same feat, this time with a 'Lightning'. Eventually, he was credited only with damaging a 'Mitchell', thus awarded with one victory point. Another B-25 was damaged by *Poruchik* Nikolay 'Kicho' Yordanov, which started to smoke heavily and left the bomber formation. Yordanov was also credited with one victory point for this feat. *Feldfebel* Aleksandăr Petkovski attacked what he described as a 'Lightning', which reportedly started to burn. However, Petkovski was eventually credited with damaging a 'twin-engine bomber', and received one point.

Soon after take-off from Bozhurishte air base, the Bf 109G of *Podporuchik* Pavel Pavlov was hit by strafing P-38s, raking the fuselage with bullets, putting dozens of holes in the airframe. The dying '109 fell back to the airfield and crashed into a concrete block, ejecting the pilot, who was severely wounded but survived.

The third and final loss sustained by the Bulgarians was the Bf 109G of *Feldfebel* Yordan Todorov, called 'The Pirate'. After one hour of hot pursuit of the enemy, followed by heavy combat with the 'Lightnings', the Bulgarian pilot's right leg was hit by five bullets, while the left one was struck by an additional shell. Lots of holes peppered the airframe and wings of his *Strela*. The wounded pilot turned his mount back, towards the base. After several attempts to land his stricken aircraft on its wheels, to

'Green 6' outlined in white identifies this Bf 109G-6 as part of 682. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak, in 1944. Notice how the entire fuselage – originally painted in standard Luftwaffe fighter scheme – is covered with dense mottles and squiggles applied in the peculiar Bulgarian light grey colour.



save the machine, the severely wounded Todorov finally lost consciousness due to loss of blood, and crashed in front of the barracks of the 682. Yato. Only after considerable time could his mangled body be removed from the twisted wreckage. His victor is believed to be 1st Lieutenant John Batie, another 97th FS pilot, who reportedly followed a Messerschmitt Me-109, which had just completed a head on attack against a flight of P-38s over Sofia. After 1st Lt. Batie poured bullets into this Messerschmitt, it was then seen to catch fire and crash into the ground below.

Most '109s which managed to return to the base had several holes in their airframes. The pilots were visibly shaken by the first real air-to-air combat with US fighters. They also mourned their first colleague to die in action.

Feldfebel Yordan Slavov Todorov, 'The Pirate', became the first combat victim of the Bulgarian fighter force, who fell in line of duty, while defending the sky of his homeland. Many more were to follow.

The war diary of the 446th BS, 321st BG, concisely records the following: "15/20 E/A [enemy aircraft] attacked after the bomb run from front, rear, and side. Moderately aggressive. Bombers probably destroyed 1 ME 109 and damaged one. Escort claimed one." The diary of the 447th BS details: "A number of ME 109's attacked our formation. S/Sgt. William R. Mercer was credited with shooting down one, Sgt. H.J. Manning got another." The diary of the last squadron of the 321st BG that took part in the mission, the 448th BS, mentions: "4 E/A attacked but were not aggressive, one destroyed. Intense, heavy, accurate flak from the city, many planes hit."

2nd Lieutenant Sam McGuffin of the 97th FS reported upon returning to Lecce air base the downing of a 'Me 109' over Sofia, with the pilot of the enemy aircraft taking to his chute. Lt. McGuffin further added in his after-action report that the pilot of the Messerschmitt 109 while bailing out narrowly missed being struck by his P-38. This was not true, however, as no Bulgarian pilot bailed out that day.

Of interest were the claims made by Captain Lawrence Bell Jr. and 1st Lieutenant William C. Woodrum, of the 95th FS, who both claimed and were credited with the destruction of a 'Focke-Wulf 190' over Sofia, at 12:30. With the VNVV not possessing any Focke-Wulf Fw 190s, and no *Luftwaffe* fighter unit being based in Bulgaria with that type at that time, these claims are questionable. The aircraft claimed as 'Fw-190s' were most likely Bf 109Gs that were misidentified. As was the case with many of the aerial combats that were to take place during the war, an attacking pilot often had only fractions of a second to visually identify an aircraft that either he was attacking, or was attacked by. With the added factors of speed, which could easily top 500 km/h, the rush of adrenaline, pilot disorientation – the so-called 'fog of war' – and less than ideal weather conditions, these mistakes were commonplace, made by all sides.

The US bomber formation performed the assigned task properly, delivered the bomb load to the target, covering it efficiently, with only minimal loss. The damage and losses assessed by the Bulgarian authorities listed 187 buildings destroyed or damaged, 59 people killed and about 120 more wounded. It was the first blow to the Bulgarian capital, which aimed at 'destroying the morale of the population', thus forcing their government to cease supporting Hitler's Germany and exit the war. Many more attacks against the capital would follow.

The US escort fighters also performed their main task properly. They were credited with five confirmed victories (3 Bf 109s and 2 Fw 190s), while the bombers' on-board gunners claimed a number



B-24s of the 465th Bomber Group cruise over the River Danube (barely seen in the bottom right corner) in spectacular weather conditions, about to penetrate into Bulgarian airspace on 23 June 1944. Bulgarian and German Bf 109Gs are waiting for them. Less than an hour later, one 'Liberator' was shot down and three others damaged by Bulgarian 'Strelas', while a German '109 pilot claimed a 'B-17'. None of the victims was the B-24G, S/N 42-78218, depicted in the foreground. However, this particular bomber's service days were numbered, as it crashed on 30 July. Notice the lewd nose art, typical of many USAAF warplanes at that time.

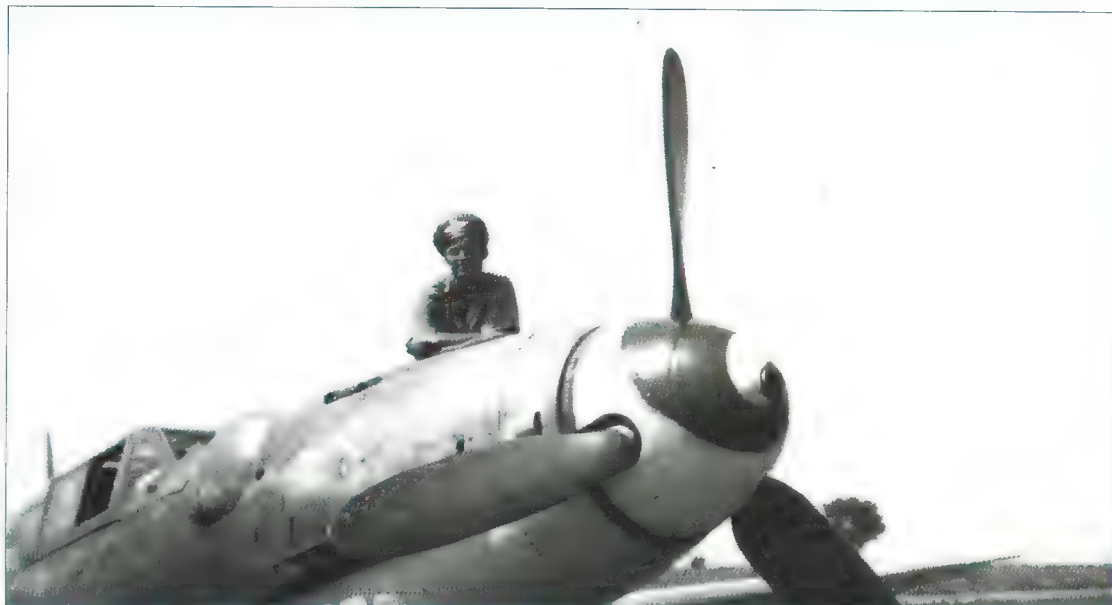
more. Two 'Me-109's were awarded as damaged (both to Capt. Charles R Spencer, who also scored a confirmed one), while three more as probable. All 'Me 109's were credited to pilots of the 97th FS, all over Sofia at 12:30. The US claims are clearly exaggerated, with about 2:1 ratio (not counting the bomber gunners' inflated claims, which was a usual occurrence), while the claims of the Bulgarian fighters appear to be realistic (although no information on the number of damaged B-25s is available, none were lost in combat).

After all of the defenders' airworthy airplanes landed and the results were tallied, the emerging picture was not favourable to the Bulgarians: no confirmed air victory, only three damaged bombers against three of their own losses and several more damaged. Alerted late, the unsynchronised, haphazard tactics employed by the inexperienced Bulgarian pilots by attacking the enemy aircraft individually or in pairs allowed the more experienced US escort fighters to spot the incoming '109s in time and jump them at once. They managed to shoot down three attackers, with only one of their own lost. No US bombers were shot down either, which should have been the primary task of the Bulgarian defenders.

Following the first live interception mission performed by Bf 109G pilots – which was judged as ineffective – it was decided to intensify training in formation flight and manoeuvring. Discipline had to be reinforced as well, as enthusiasm – which the Bulgarian fighter pilots did not lack at all – was clearly not enough in defeating, or at least perturbing, the enemy. The 3/6. *Orlyak* combat diary mentions that on 18 November large-size combat training flight was performed under the supervision of *Luftwaffe* Majors 'Kyule' (actually Kühle³⁷) and 'Kioder' (sic! unidentified). The training did not go as well as the German officers wanted, so it was ordered to be repeated two days later. The diary records: "*This time, the exercise ended with better result than the one on 18 Nov.*" The additional drills were done in time, as the American warplanes returned to Bulgaria ten days after the initial raid.

37 Major Helmut Kühle, head of the German flying instructors in charge with training the Bulgarian student pilots.

Podporuchik Evgheni G. Tonchev, pilot in 682. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak, leans against his Bf 109G-6, sometime in the second half of 1944. He ended the war with five points (three for a four-engine bomber downed on 18 May 1944, and two for a heavily damaged 'Liberator' on 23 June 1944).



Podporuchik Pavel E. Pavlov of 3/6. Orlyak sits on the edge of his Bf 109G-6's cabin. We can thank him for many of the Bulgarian 'Strela' photos that survived those war years.



'Strela' G-6, White 2, is seen in the company of 'Drozhd' (Fi 156), No. 6. The engine cowling underside was painted yellow, as were the lower wingtips. The 'Strela's' Nomenklaturen Nomer may have been 75/7057. Unfortunately, no further details are available.





Podofitser Atanas Matev sits on the cockpit edge of his 'Strela-G' in early 1944.

On 24 November 1943, it was the turn of the US 'heavies' to pound the marshalling yard of Sofia instead of medium bombers that had performed the previous raid. This time, 17 B-24s of the 98th Bomber Group, along with 19 B-24s of the 376th Bomber Group, took off from their bases in southern Italy and made their way across the Adriatic Sea towards Sofia. Fighter escort was provided by 32 P-38s of the 82nd Fighter Group. However, about one-third of the 'Lightnings' would either turn back, or become separated from their escorted colleagues, prior to reaching Sofia. These early returns were due to either mechanical problems, heavy cloud cover, or remarkably because a number of pilots believed that the mission had been cancelled when they saw the B-24s circling over the Adriatic Sea waiting to form up. About a quarter of the bombers also returned home early. Thus, the US attack formation that actually crossed into Bulgarian airspace was much smaller than originally planned. Despite heavy clouds, the 376th BG managed to hit the target; however, the 98th BG did not drop their ordnance, as the target could not be positively located.

As with the previous raid against Sofia, the Bulgarian fighter pilots were not given enough early warning. Eventually, 19 Bf 109Gs of the 3/6. *Orlyak* scrambled from Bozhurishte to intercept the intruders, along with the emergency patrol based on Skopie. The 2/6. *Orlyak* would again remain an 'outsider'.

At approximately 13:00, the Messerschmitt pilots located and attacked an 18-bomber formation over the outskirts of Sofia. A dozen Bf 109G-2s from the 672nd and 682nd *Yata*, along with the *Shtab* flight, attacked the enemy formation, while the 692nd *Yato* stayed at higher altitude, to form top cover for their colleagues rushing towards the bombers. This time, the number of US and Bulgarian fighters were roughly at par – a rare occurrence during the air war over Bulgaria and, generally, over Europe, where the Axis defenders would almost always combat the intruders in great numerical inferiority.

Kapitan Chudomir Toplodolski, Commanding Officer of 3/6. *Orlyak* and leader of the *Shtab* flight, jumped on the enemy first. He managed to hit and set alight the two port engines of a B-24, which eventually crashed at Strumitsa. Toplodolski also damaged another 'Liberator' in the Dupnitsa region, which reportedly started to smoke and lagged behind the bomber 'box'. However, while attacking this second target at close range, the leader's aircraft was hit by a hail of fire coming from the heavy bomber's gunners. Three shells penetrated the cockpit, barely missing the pilot. Other projectiles were stopped by the seat armour. The Messerschmitt of *Kpt.* Toplodolski's wingman, *Podpor.* Mihail Banov, was also hit, but not severely. Both airmen could eventually return to their base. The fighter group's leader was awarded with five points for his outstanding achievement. He was also decorated for his brave conduct, for leading by example. *Podporuchik* Mihail Grigorov (flying a Bf 109E?) was also awarded with two points for 'efficiently hitting a four-engine bomber that started to smoke and left formation'.

The 682nd *Yato*, led by *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov, met about 20 bombers near Svoge (north of Sofia). The incoming attack reportedly forced the bombers to drop their payload early and retreat. One 'Liberator' was severely hit by Stoyanov, who received two victory points for this. Probably, the same bomber which started to lag behind was then attacked by Stoyanov's wingman, *Feldfebel* Hristo Tsankov³⁸ Koev, who finished it off at Bogumil (today called Bogomila), being awarded with full three points for the

38 Surname based on the combat diary of 3/6. *Orlyak*. In the official list of air victories, the surname is given as Tsankov, which was actually the pilot's middle name. Such switch of surnames and middle names can often be encountered in Bulgarian documents, causing considerable confusion to researchers.



The flamboyant Podporuchik Stefan Marinopolski, displaying a fashionable thin moustache and a colourful (and highly irregular) scarf, cracks a smile in front of his mount, Bf 109G-6, 'Green 6', called 'Helga'. Marinopolski had a very eventful and tumultuous life. He participated in most of defensive actions against USAAF formations attacking Bulgaria, first flying on the D.520, then switching to the superior Bf 109G. His final tally stood at three points, earned for the 'Liberator' downed on 20 December 1943. Shot down unhurt on 17 April 1944 by 'Mustangs'. Repeatedly arrested post war, then defected to the 'West'. Note that the Cyrillic letter 'B', topped with a crown, is missing from the centre top of the wings sewn over his right pocket.

'kill'. At this moment, the '109s were running low on fuel; therefore, Stoyanov ordered his men to return home. Koev's mount was also hit in combat.

In battling the P-38s, Bf 109G-pilots *Podporuchik* Mihail Uzunov, *Podporuchik* Kiril Iliev and *Feldfebel* Nikola Kralichev each reported damaging a P-38, although none of the 82nd Fighter Group aircraft actually suffered any noticeable damage from enemy fire. Their claims were officially recorded, each airman received zero points. *Podporuchik* Mihail Grigorov and his wingman, *Feldfebel* Stefan Konzov, both members of the 672nd Yato, scored good hits at the first pass through the bomber 'box'. Neither claim was officially considered, however; only the combat diary mentions them.

One P-38, piloted by 2nd Lieutenant Edward Tinker of the 97th FS, was indeed lost, but this was reportedly due to lack of fuel and not to enemy action. The pilot ditched his crippled aircraft safely in the Adriatic Sea, off the coast of Italy. While pilots of the 82nd Fighter Group were to escape unscathed from the battle with the Bulgarian Messerschmitts, pilots of the 3/6. *Orlyak* were not as lucky. *Podporuchik* Mityu Disov perished in his Bf 109G-2, when he was shot down by a P-38. The charred remains of the pilot were found 1 km north of Dolni Pasarel, located south-east of the capital. This loss was most likely inflicted by Major William Litton of the 96th FS, who was credited with a 'Me-109' over Sofia, and was the only P-38 pilot to do so that day. Two other claims submitted for a 'Me-109' each over Sofia by two 97th FS pilots remained probable. While no other VNVV Messerschmitt was to be lost that day, three others were to land with

varying degrees of damage. One of them was *Podporuchik* Petăr Bochev, who was wounded on his back, and had to belly land near Breznik. The aircraft suffered 40% damage, thus was repairable. The pilot ended up in hospital, but returned to active duty later. The second pilot hit in combat was *Podporuchik* Mihail Grigorov. He had to land his aircraft blind after the engine was hit and leaking oil covered the windshield. Despite the low visibility, Grigorov managed to successfully belly-land at Bozhurishte air base, with minimal damage to his aircraft. The third pilot who had to return to the base with damage to his mount was *Podporuchik* Mihail Uzunov, who also made a successful wheels-up landing on Bozhurishte's grass runway. Most other Messerschmitts which made regular wheels-down landing had at least a few hits in their fuselage and wings.

By attacking the P-38s in *dvoikas* (twos), *troykas* (threes) and *chetvorkas* (fours), the Bulgarian pilots of the ad-hoc 'attack group' were able to draw sufficient numbers of escorts away, to allow the other Bf 109s of the 'cover group' several chances to attack the now unprotected B-24s. On making these concentrated attacks, the group leader and one of his men claimed the destruction of a B-24 each, as detailed earlier (3 points each). Three further pilots received credits for severely damaging several B-24s (2 points each). The reinforcement of air discipline and concentration of firepower on individual targets clearly led to better results. Air combat with US fighters remained inconclusive; however, they were only secondary targets, as the primary ones were the bombers responsible for causing damage to Bulgarian infrastructure and losses to population.

Two of the 376th Bomber Group B-24s would actually fail to return from the mission, these losses being indeed attributed to the attacks of 'Me-109s' over Sofia. The first loss consisted of the B-24D (S/N 42-41018 'Earthquake') of the 514th BS, piloted by 2nd Lt. Philip Gore. One of the engines of the 'Liberator' was hit while the first wave of Bf 109Gs made the initial slashing attack through the bomber formation. With one engine on fire, 2nd Lt. Gore's B-24 began to lose altitude, at which time he ordered his crew to take to their chutes. The bomber crashed north of Strumitsa, in Macedonia. Tragically, 2nd Lt. Charles Graham, who was the bombardier on 2nd Lt. Gore's B-24, would be shot and killed by local militia shortly after landing, with Staff Serg. Thomas DeGuiseppe being shot and severely wounded. DeGuiseppe and the rest of 2nd Lt. Gore's crew who remained alive would all be rounded up by peasants and turned over to the Bulgarian Army. Eventually, they ended up in the notorious POW camp at Shumen³⁹.

The second loss suffered was the B-24J (S/N 42-73137) of the 512th BS, piloted by Captain Dragisha Stanislavlyevich. Of interest, this B-24 was crewed by ex-Yugoslav citizens, minus one member. Cpt. Stanislavlyevich's B-24 would be one of two such Yugoslav-crewed aircraft on this mission to Sofia. During the 3/6. *Orlyak*'s Messerschmitt pilots' first firing pass through the 376th BG formations, Cpt. Stanislavlyevich's B-24 received the unwanted attention of two to three of the Bulgarian fighters. The initial attack inflicted heavy damage to the right wing and caused a fire in the right wheel well. Upon

39 While the Shumen POW camp was operational (289 days in total, from 25 November 1943 to 8 September 1944), it was home to 329 prisoners from 11 nations. The largest group was made by 291 USAF airmen, consisting of 126 officers and 165 non-commissioned servicemen. The British group was the next largest, with 16 English and Scottish RAF servicemen. One Canadian officer, five officers from the South African AF and three Australian aviators represented the Commonwealth. Nine Yugoslav airmen from the USAAF added to the diversity. Five British agents were also imprisoned – one English major, one Greek and one Serb paratrooper, plus two Dutchmen, who were brothers.

the Bulgarian fighters turning around for a second pass, several of them now singled out the damaged and smoking B-24. On this second pass, the '109s racked the left wing of the ailing B-24 with cannon and machine gun fire, causing heavy damage. This decided the fate of the aircraft. With the B-24 smoking heavily and losing altitude, the captain ordered the crew to bail out, which all were able to do. The doomed 'Liberator' crashed at Bogumil, south of Skopie, with the crew being rounded up by Bulgarian soldiers and made prisoners of war. They would join their other captured comrades at Camp Shumen.

The official tally of the day for Bulgarian pilots was two bombers shot down and three others damaged, while several P-38s were attacked with 'good effect'. In turn, they paid with the life of one of their own, along with a destroyed Bf 109G, and at least five more Messerschmitts damaged in combat. On this particular occasion, both the Bulgarians' and the Americans' confirmed air victories closely match the other side's actual combat losses, so no overclaim happened (except for the notoriously overclaiming by on-board gunners) – a rare occurrence in the often messy and confusing air combat, where the so-called 'fog of war' often played a crucial role. However, if the claims of the anti-aircraft artillery crews are considered (they were credited with two victories; one of their victims crashed near Radomir, the other one near Bitolya), the balance tips.

While the Bulgarian pilots had suffered at the hands of the P-38s again, they had been able to inflict significant damage to the bombers. The repeated attacks dispersed many of the attacking B-24s, causing a good number of them to miss the intended target. This was the actual main goal of the defenders. The last sentence of the mission summary report (#568) of the 82nd FG for the day perhaps summed up the best the credit due to Bulgarian fighter pilots: *"The Me 109s, after circling our formation and appraising it well, they attacked aggressively. Their tactics of detaching a few fighters to draw the attention of our fighters so that other E/A could attack our bombers was clever."*

Overall, the damage inflicted on the marshalling yards of Sofia this time was minimal. While rail traffic was temporarily disrupted, the yard was quickly back in the business of dispatching trains throughout the Kingdom of Bulgaria and south-eastern Europe. The damage report by Bulgarian authorities listed some eighty-seven buildings destroyed, nine people killed, and seventeen wounded.



Podporuchik Anton I. Barev was member of 2/6. Orlyak. His fighter group was the second one to be re-equipped from the D.520 to the Bf 109G, starting in January 1944. On 23 June, he and three other of his colleagues jointly finished off a 'Liberator'. Based on the group's combat diary, all four pilots were credited with a joint victory. However, for some reason, this lone 'kill' does not show up in the official list of air victories, possibly it was later annulled. On 28 June, Barev was wounded during the heavy bombardment of the Marno Pole (Karlovo) air base. Retired Col. Barev died on 8 March 2010, at the age of 89.

Last Month of 1943, Last Attacks

With the bombing raids of the previous month ending with less than desirable results, a renewed effort was put forth by the USAAF in December 1943. On the morning of 10 December, 31 B-24s of the 98th BG and 376th BG took off from southern Italy and headed out over the Adriatic Sea. Their destination once again was the marshalling yard at Sofia. Escort for this raid came in the usual form of P-38s of the 82nd FG, which was able to put up 47 aircraft, with only five of these aborting prior to reaching Sofia.

As this strike force neared the Albanian coast, the *Luftwaffe* plotters of *Jagdfliegerführer Griechenland*, located in Athens, were already tracking it. By the time the raiders had crossed the mountains of Albania, calls of alert had already been sent out to the *Luftwaffe*'s *Jagd* units in occupied Yugoslavia, Greece and Rumania (there were still no *Luftwaffe* fighters stationed in Bulgaria). However, once again, the VNVV headquarters were only advised that an enemy force was heading in the direction of Sofia by the time the Americans were already entering Bulgarian airspace. The lateness of notification of this and future raids would be one of the greatest hindrances to the VNVV fighter arm.

With the alert finally raised, 3/6. *Orlyak* was able to scramble seventeen Bf 109G-2s off Bozhurishte. By the time the B-24s and P-38s arrived over Sofia at approximately 12:20, the interceptor Bf 109G pilots were already at the scene, but not high enough. After gaining altitude, the 3/6. *Orlyak* airmen positioned themselves over the incoming warplanes, at 7,500 m, while the Americans proceeded to enter their bombing run. As they had done in the previous encounter with 'Lightnings', the Bf 109G pilots dropped from above singularly, or in twos, and made slashing attacks on the twin-boom fighters escorting the bombers. After making these attacks, the '109s would then either dive to ground level, or try to regain altitude. The hope in this 'hit and run' tactic was to draw attention away from the 'Liberators', leaving them vulnerable to the second wave. However, contrary to the previous mission, this time the pilots of the 82nd FG were not about to lose any of their protégés. The 'Lightning' pilots were able to keep a protective umbrella over the 'Liberators' despite the Bulgarians' attack, and did not give prolonged chase after the Messerschmitts, as they had done on the 24th of November mission.

Although no confirmed destruction of an aerial target was awarded to any *Strela* pilot, several claims were filed for damaged P-38s and B-24s. *Kapitan* Chudomir Toplodolski, *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov, *Podporuchik* Marin Tsvétkov, *Podporuchik* Kiril Iliev and *Podporuchik* Mihail Uzunov all reportedly damaged



Four officer pilots of 2/6. Orlyak pose in front of Marinopolski's Bf 109G-6, 'Green 6', fitted with an underbelly auxiliary fuel tank, parked on Karlovo air base, in July 1944. They are, from left: Podporuchik Hristo I. Petrov; Poruchik Nedelcho D. Bonchev; Podporuchik Krum H. Atanasov (sitting on the wing) and Podporuchik Stefan N. Marinopolski. This particular 'Gustav' is fitted with a glass armoured headrest, typical of late production G-6s. The light grey spots peculiar to many Bf 109Gs in Bulgarian service are clearly visible aft the cockpit. Note all service writings are in German. For a colour artwork of this 'Strela', please check out page 135.

P-38s during the engagement, but received zero points. Claims against four-engine bombers were made by Poruchik Lyuben Kondakov and Feldfebel Aleksandăr Petkovski, who were credited with damaging a couple of B-24s from the raiding force, thus earning 2 victory points each. Nine Bf 109Gs of IV/JG 27 also scrambled from Podgoritsa to intercept US warplanes returning from Sofia. They claimed one 'Lightning', while losing one of their own (Lt. Wolfgang Hohls, acting C/O of the 11th Staffel). No US warplane was actually lost in combat, although several were damaged.

Despite the lack of official air victory credit for Bulgarian '109 fighters, one P-38 (S/N 42-12894), flown by 2nd Lieutenant Harry Downey Jr. of the 97th FS, was lost just prior to reaching Sofia. It appears that 2nd Lt. Downey was most likely lost because one of his belly tanks was jettisoned prematurely, leaving insufficient fuel to make the return trip back to Italy. Downey's body was not found, thus he is still listed as 'missing in action'. Another P-38, belonging to 2nd Lt. George Magee of the 95th FS, lost an engine over Sofia, and crashed upon returning to Italy, on Pancrazio airfield, badly injuring him. The official records are unclear as whether the loss of the engine was a direct result of combat activity or malfunction. However, personal recollections note it was damaged by enemy aircraft (initially, the pilot was listed erroneously as KIA). A third 'Lightning' of the 82nd FG was also destroyed in a crash in Italy, with details lacking; however.

The US airmen reported "about twenty German and Italian single-seat fighters [the latter most probably mistaken for the French Dewoitine D.520 type] attacked over the target, and another nine hit the formation near the Adriatic coast on the return". In contrast to the Bulgarian Bf 109G fighter pilots, who did not claim a single enemy aircraft as shot down, US fighter pilots filed a huge number of victory claims upon returning to their base. In total, eight air victories were awarded to them against 'Me-109s', completed by one more against a 'FW-190'. In addition, one 'Me-109' was judged as probable air victory, while four additional ones as damaged. All these claims were located as over Sofia, at 12:20. If we consider the irretrievable losses of the Bulgarians (one D.520 and a couple more damaged), the US fighter pilots' overclaim ratio is a whopping 9:1!

The damage recorded on the ground amounted to only ten people killed and twenty-one wounded, with eighty-three buildings listed as being destroyed. The marshalling yard was not put out of action this time either.

The combat début of the French Dewoitine D.520 fighter was less than exemplary. In addition to the loss of a squadron commander, none of the Dewoitine pilots were able to inflict serious damage to the bombers, the primary target of an interceptor fighter. It became clear that the D.520 had become obsolescent by the end of 1943, and was unable to satisfactorily fill the gap of modern interceptor fighter type the VNVV so desperately needed. Therefore, the task to *effectively* defend Bulgarian airspace could be performed primarily only by the Messerschmitt Bf 109G pilots, Bulgarians and Germans alike.

Losses in men and matériel had to be replenished quickly, as it was clear to both the Bulgarians and the Germans that the next enemy raid was a matter of days away. On the 12th, Ppor. Gencho Dimitrov [last name actually Ivanov] and Ivan Bonev, as well as Feldf. Konzov, went to Rumania to pick up new aircraft. They returned five days later. During landing, the starboard undercarriage leg of Ivanov's *Strela*



broke, the wing twisted when the machine came to an abrupt halt. Despite the accident, the order of battle for 18 December shows an excess of two men and two '109s compared to the previous day, bringing the total to 21 aircraft and 22 pilots. That day, joint combat training was held by 2/6. *Orlyak* and the entire 3/6. *Orlyak* at 7,500 m altitude. *Ppor.* Banov had to land at Bozhurishte due to faulty propeller pitch, while *Ppor.* Grigorov landed at Vrazhdebna, with the same failure. These incidents did not alter the number of available aircraft. However, the number of serviceable Bf 109Gs dropped by one the next day. While flying from Vrazhdebna back to Bozhurishte, *Ppor.* Mihail Grigorov had to force-land between the villages of Vrabnitsa and Ilentsi, due to a broken engine component. The experienced pilot escaped unhurt and the aircraft was damaged only 10%.

With the end of the year quickly approaching, the marshalling yard of Sofia was to suffer one more bombing raid. The participants in this last mission of 1943, performed on 20 December, consisted of 18 B-24s of the 376th Bomber Group and 18 B-24s of the 98th Bomber Group, with an escort of some fifty P-38s, provided once again by the 82nd Fighter Group. Five of these P-38s would return home for a variety of reasons prior to reaching Sofia. Upon making the now familiar flight path across the Adriatic Sea, the raiding force arrived over Sofia at approximately 12:45.

Once again, as with previous raids, the VNVV received word of the raid as the American aircraft were just crossing the frontier into Bulgaria. Along with two dozen Dewoitine D.520s, sixteen Bf 109G-2s of the 3/6. *Orlyak* scrambled at 12:35. By the time the Bulgarian fighter pilots arrived in the airspace over Sofia, flying at about 7,000 m, the 'Liberators' were just beginning their bombing run. On gaining further altitude over the 'Lightnings' flying top cover for the bomber formation, Bulgarian pilots used their now predictable tactic of diving down and making firing passes at the American fighter aircraft below. Again, the hope was to either lure, or distract the P-38 pilots enough to allow for the second wave of Bulgarian fighters a chance to make unhindered attacks on the B-24s. While the tactics employed against the P-38s was similar to previous encounters, new methods for dealing with the B-24s were being put into action. This day, in making their attacks on the B-24s, the Bulgarians used frontal attacks, after which they would try to dive under the bombers to avoid the bulk of their defensive fire.

After the mêlée ended, the Bf 109G pilots claimed several enemy fighters destroyed, or damaged. Air victory claims were filed by the following 3/6. *Orlyak* pilots: *Kapitan* Chudomir Toplodolski, *Poruchik* Nikolay Yordanov, *Podporuchik* Georgi Kyumyurdzhiev⁴⁰ and *Feldfebel* Hristo Koev. The confirmed claims earned for each of them one victory point. A further P-38 was claimed as damaged by *Podporuchik* Marin Tsvëtkov, who did not receive any point, however. In making their attacks against the raiding bombers, *Podporuchik* Gencho D. Ivanov⁴¹ was credited with the destruction of a 'Liberator' and

Bf 109G-6, presumably 'Green 1', banks to the left upon sighting the enemy warplane formation. Moments later, the pilot would drop the belly tank then dive upon the target, usually four-engine US bombers. A dogfight with the bombers' top escort would then follow. This is a typical scenario Bulgarian fighter pilots performed in the 'hot' summer of 1944.

40 The 'Lightning' shot down by *Ppor.* Kyumyurdzhiev force-landed near Pernik. When found by Bulgarian soldiers, the American pilot – believed to be 2nd Lt. Edward Tinker, of Native American origins – was reportedly sitting calmly on his twisted mount and smoking a cigarette, waiting to be picked up. In many printed sources, this P-38 'kill' is not mentioned at all.

41 Similarly to Koev's, this pilot's surname is also given erroneously in the official victory list as Dimitrov, which was actually his middle name.



Poruchik Petăr Manolev stops for a moment so his photo can be taken in front of his Bf 109G-6, equipped with an underbelly auxiliary fuel tank. Based on his logbook, Manolev – who was a seasoned flight instructor – started flying the ‘Strela’ on 24 July 1944 with 3/6. Orlyak, stationed on Bozhurishte, aboard aircraft No. 10. His next flight with the ‘109 was already a combat one, performed only two days later, also aboard No. 10!

damaging another one (3+2 points). Fellow Messerschmitt pilots, *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov, *Podporuchik* Georgi Kyumyurdzhiev and *Feldfebel* Aleksandăr Petkovski were also officially credited with having inflicted serious damage to several B-24s (2 points each).

In addition to these victories obtained by Messerschmitt pilots of 3/6. *Orlyak*, one further pilot from this unit – actually from the *Orlyak Shtab* (command) – was to make his mark this day, in a unique fashion, which would reverberate until today. *Poruchik* Dimităr Spisarevski, on his third combat sortie, had to take off later than the rest of the pilots of his unit, as the engine of his aircraft would not start. He then jumped into a spare aircraft – believed to be ‘Yellow 2’ of the *orlyak shtab*, or group’s staff – and rushed through the airstrip, trying to catch up with his colleagues. However, Spisarevski soon found himself alone, embroiled in the ensuing air battle going on around him – his first actual combat situation. Upon finding a separate B-24 group flying apart of the main formation, made by about 16 bombers, Spisarevski singled out the lead aircraft and commenced his head-on attack. The bomber he had chosen to attack was B-24J ‘Big Nig’ (S/N 42-73428) of the 515th BS, 376th BG, piloted by 2nd Lt. Robert Brown. While making a head-on firing pass and going to the right side of the B-24, *Poruchik* Spisarevski’s Bf 109G-2 collided with the bomber’s fuselage. The B-24 broke apart and crashed to the ground, where it exploded, taking the lives of the entire crew, except the tail gunner. The lucky US soldier somehow escaped, being thrown away from the doomed ‘Liberator’ and landed safely. The daring Bulgarian pilot died as well along with his victims. The wreckage of *Poruchik* Spisarevski’s Messerschmitt, along with that of 2nd Lt. Brown’s B-24, would later be found close to each

other, near Dolni Pasarel, just south-east of Sofia⁴².

After this incident, *Poruchik* Spisarevski was instantly turned into a national hero, with the Bulgarian Government capitalizing on the incident by claiming that he had sacrificed his life for his homeland by deliberately ramming the American bomber. He was dubbed «жива торпила», i.e., ‘live torpedo’. What was known as ‘*taran*’ by the Russians, ‘*kamikaze*’ by the Japanese, ‘*Rammjäger*’ by the Germans, would be known as ‘*zhiva torpila*’ by the Bulgarians. This heroic appellation is still widely used today by the patriotic Bulgarian printed and electronic media. Out of respect for the Bulgarian collective conscience and remembrance of the fallen soldiers, the Author also uses this same term when referring to Dimităr Spisarevski and his ultimate sacrifice in defending his homeland at all cost.

However, historical reality looked differently. Rather than being a deliberate act, *Poruchik* Spisarevski’s more likely cause of action was that the first-time combatant, presumed wounded, probably misjudged the distance between his Messerschmitt running at full speed and the B-24 that he was rapidly closing in head-on (if we add the speed of both aircraft, we get approximately 350+550=900 km/h!), thus unintentionally colliding with it. Another, even more probable cause of his collision with the B-24 could be that gunners on nearby 376th BG B-24s reported striking *Poruchik* Spisarevski’s Messerschmitt just before the fatal ramming, severely injuring or killing him just prior to the final act. Missing Air Crew Report (MACR) 1592, dated 21 December 1943, detailing the circumstances of the demise of B-24J, S/N 42-73428, called ‘Big Nig’, describes the cause of the loss as: “Collided with damaged [underline mine, D.B.] *Me 109 enemy A/C, tearing off right wing*”. Staff Sergeant Curtis ‘Curt’ Torfin⁴³, who was a waist gunner on another B-24 in the 376th Bomber Group, 513rd Bomber Squadron, participating in the raid, witnessed the collision. He adds credibility to the belief that the ramming was not a deliberate act, but more likely the result of inertia of the uncontrolled Bf 109G mortally hit by defence fire. Staff Serg. Torfin recalls: “We were leading the ‘c’ section, and Brown [the pilot of ‘Big Nig’] was in position number three, second element. So that put us directly behind him, or a little to the left. The [Bulgarian] fighter plane was coming in from about one o’clock high. Everybody within range was shooting at him. I could see my tracers bouncing off him along with many others. I firmly believe that the pilot was dead before he ever hit the B-24.”⁴⁴

42 USAAF records (MACR 1592) give the bomber’s crash location at Pancherevo, located about 10 km north-west of Dolni Pasarel, and the crew’s fate as 8xKIA, 1xMIA and 1xPOW.

43 Torfin completed fifty combat missions as waist gunner in the 376th BG. He was awarded the Air Medal with six Oak Leaf Clusters. He became President of the 376th Heavy Bomb Group Veterans Association until his death on 31 July 2001.

44 Some Bulgarian published sources state that when Spisarevski’s body was found by local village boys who arrived to the crash site first, they said he looked intact, only his parachute was slightly deployed. This claim is highly suspicious though, in view of the high-speed collision. Despite, if these recollections are accurate, it would mean that the pilot was not mortally wounded by the on-board gunners, and was still conscious a while after collision. This would add credibility to the theory



Regardless of the actual cause of collision, the basic fact remains: a young Bulgarian fighter pilot gave his life during his first actual combat, while defending his homeland. This very fact rightfully earns Spisarevski – the so-called ‘live torpedo’ – his ‘hero’ status.

Although Bulgarian pilots made a large number of claims against the attackers (two B-24s and four P-38s, in total, not counting the four damaged ‘Liberators’ and one additional ‘Lightning’), this time most of them were invalid. Only one B-24 of the 376th BG was actually lost over Bulgaria, the one Bf 109G-pilot *Poruchik* Dimităr Spisarevski collided with. By contrast, three P-38s of the 82nd FG failed to return to their base in Italy. All three US fighter pilots ended up as prisoners of war⁴⁵. This would make more than 2:1 overclaim ratio as regards the fighters and 3:1 overclaim as regards the bombers claimed by Bulgarian fighter pilots, again disregarding the damaged aircraft and flak crews’ claims.

The American airmen overclaimed as well, albeit only slightly. ‘Lightning’ pilots put forward a total of seven claims, all achieved over Sofia at 12:50. Of these, two ‘Me-109s’ and one ‘FW-190’ were confirmed, while four ‘Me-109s’ remained as ‘damaged’. In addition, bomber crews claimed six enemy fighters destroyed (one of them was certainly Spisarevski’s mount) and three more probably. From the Bulgarian side, besides Spisarevski’s lost mount, *Podporuchik* Georgi Kyumyurdzhiev’s Bf 109G was also shot down in a dogfight with ‘Lightnings’ and fell 200 m from Kalishte, near Pernik, along with its dead pilot. Kyumyurdzhiev had just scored a ‘kill’ over the P-38 of 2nd Lt. Tinker of the 97th FS, when the American’s wingman finished him off. The victory over *Ppor.* Kyumyurdzhiev was the result of an attack by 2nd Lt. Donald Foley, who was flying that day as 2nd Lt. Tinker’s wingman. In addition, a D.520 was shot down in flames as well. Another three Bulgarian fighters force landed due to combat damage. One of them was the Bf 109G-2 of *Podporuchik* Mihail Banov, which had been damaged in air combat, but the skilled pilot managed to perform a safe belly landing with the engine shut off. With this end result considered, the American fighter pilots’ claims were almost ‘spot on’. The claims put forward by the ‘Liberator’ on-board gunners is another story, however.

While Bulgarian fighter pilots substantially overclaimed their air victories, the fact is they were able to hold their own in the air when pitted against the experienced fighter pilots of the 82nd FG. This was clearly thanks to the extensive training by German instructors. An after-action report for the 82nd FG sums up the best the abilities of the Bulgarian pilots encountered on the 20th of December: “*Their tactics*

The same aircraft, depicted two pages earlier, seen moments later. Occasionally, overexcited pilots forgot to release the drop tank before engaging in air combat and performed combat manoeuvres with the tank still attached, even though the aircraft’s in-flight performance was greatly affected by this extra feature. Notice the dense, small light grey dots covering the entire mid- and rear fuselage, a scheme typical to Bulgarian ‘Gustavs’ in the 1944–1945 time period. The upper wingtips were not painted yellow any more in 1944.

that Spisarevski actually voluntarily rammed the enemy bomber, as officially claimed. His mechanic, Ivan Atanasov, recalled that Spisarevski would say to his fellow pilots if his aircraft is damaged, or the ammunition exhausted, or himself wounded, but the enemy is approaching the city, then he would ram the bomber. Whatever version is closer to truth, only the official autopsy on Spisarevski’s body would clarify the question if he died prior to, or upon impact with the bomber, or only while hitting the ground. This post-mortem report might exist at the military archives (DVIA) at Veliko Tărnovo.

45 One of them was 2nd Lt. Edward Tinker, who had lost another ‘Lightning’ during a combat sortie to Bulgaria only 26 days earlier.

Poruchik Boris Damev checks the time before he takes off aboard his 'white 8', sometime in the summer of 1944. This Bf 109G-6 has a tall tail.



against our fighters seemed to keep pecking away at our formation, holding them in the target area as long as possible after the bombers had withdrawn. They seemed to be highly trained, competent, and aggressive pilots, because they dived from upstairs singly, or in pairs, while others circled around above waiting for some P-38s to follow them down. They would often attack from above and behind, in twos, breaking away to each side, diving down when our pilots turned into them and immediately using their great diving speed to zoom back up for another try. As they started up, two others would come down. This went on for 40 minutes before our pilots could shake them off. The enemy pilots were definitely first-class and in their diving attacks gave our pilots much less chance to shoot at them than on previous engagements over Sofia.”

Overall destruction by the US air raid resulted in some sixty-eight people on the ground being killed, with another one hundred and twelve being listed as wounded. Material damage was recorded as one hundred and thirteen buildings destroyed and another four hundred and sixty-nine suffering varying degrees of damage.

Summing up, if we consider only the irretrievable manpower losses in the fighter vs. fighter, man vs. man air combat of late 1943, the Bulgarians lost three Bf 109G pilots (plus a D.520) killed in action, while the USAAF lost six P-38 pilots (three KIA and three POW). Material damage to warplanes was much higher on both sides, though. While approximate damage to Bulgarian fighters can be ascertained; unfortunately, the overall damage suffered by the American side cannot be followed due to lack of detailed information. USAAF loss reports usually refer only to irretrievable losses, and rarely detail combat damage to warplanes that manage to return to their home base, despite some of them being struck off charge due to the extent of damage inflicted by the enemy.

It has to be noted that only limited *Luftwaffe* interference in the air war over Bulgaria was recorded for late 1943 (chiefly by elements of IV./JG 27, based briefly on Skopje east airfield from 6 December on⁴⁶). In December, Bulgarian anti-aircraft artillery crews were credited with one enemy aircraft downed. However, it's unclear whether that is one in total, or one for each combat date.

On the penultimate day of the year, the VNVV Commander gave a short, moving speech in front of the 3/6. *Orlyak*'s staff and personnel. After the motivation speech, he awarded the following pilots with 'Order of Bravery', 4th Grade, 2nd Class: *Kpt.* Toplodolski, *Por.* Yordanov, *Ppor.* Grigorov and Dimitrov [Ivanov], *Feldf.* Tsankov [Koev], Kralichev and Petkovski.

While the 20 December bombing mission was to be the last air raid of 1943 carried out by the Allies against Bulgaria, the following year's onslaught would show an intensity unmatched by anything the Bulgarians had ever experienced, both on the ground and in the air.

46 Other elements of this *Jagdgruppe* were based at Tirana, Devoli, Mostar and Podgoritsa. Elements of IV./JG 27 based on this latter air base in Montenegro suffered the loss of seven Bf 109Gs due to strafing and bombing by US warplanes on 25 October.

Bloody 1944

The New Year started in force. USAAF tried new methods and tested new warplane types not used in the air war over Bulgaria before: B-17 'Flying Fortress', P-47 'Thunderbolt' and, later, the highly efficient and fearsome P-51 'Mustang'. The number of warplanes thrown into battle by the Americans also increased significantly. The Bulgarians tried to match the American armada with what they had and received from the Germans. Sensing the expected increase of Allied air incursions in Bulgarian airspace, the *Führer* ordered in an encrypted message dated 2 January 1944, coming through Bucharest, that equipment enough for a new (undersized) fighter group, namely 28 Messerschmitt '109s and all additional matériel, to be given to the Bulgarians. The *Luftwaffe* also 'chipped in' with its meagre forces stationed in Bulgaria. These steps made by both sides led to what would be known as 'total confrontation'.

On 4th January, 81 B-17s of the 97th, 99th and 301st BGs were sent over Bulgaria, being escorted by 69 P-38s of the 1st, 14th and 82nd FGs. In addition, 23 P-47s from the 325th FG provided supplementary escort for the bombers, but only up to the coastline of occupied Yugoslavia. The raiders met heavy overcast over Bulgaria, so they could not efficiently bomb their intended targets. For example, the 416th BS' B-17s did not drop their ordnance at all. It was the 117th mission for the 2nd BG; however, Sofia could not be bombed due to a 10/10 overcast. Instead, the 27 bombers released their payload (81 tons of 500-lb. bombs) on Dupnitsa. The Bulgarian *Strelas* did not take off due to adverse weather. However, three Bf 109G-6s of *Stab/JG 27* scrambled from Niš. Bf 109G-6, W.Nr. 440007, was shot down over Bulgaria, *Geschwaderadjutant* Oblt. Jost Schlang – former wingman to *Hptm.* Hans-Joachim Marseille while serving in Africa – being killed in a crash 15 km west of Bozhurishte, while another Bf 109G-6 of JG 27 force landed. USAAF fighter pilots filed only a single claim against an enemy fighter, by 1st Lt. William C. Woodrum of the 95th FS, who reported a 'Me-109' damaged over Sofia. Bulgarian specialised publications do not even mention this introductory USAAF air raid of the New Year and the subsequent Axis losses.

On the 9th, a much-anticipated German reinforcement arrived from Germany, via Rumania (Târgșorul-Nou airfield, west of Ploiești), to Bulgaria, more precisely to Vrazhdebna air base, located east of Sofia. It was a weak *Luftwaffe* fighter group (I./JG 5) that showed up, with about two dozen aircraft⁴⁷. The reinforcement pretty much doubled the number of fighters available for the defence of Bulgaria. Some of the Germans' Bf 109Gs had underwing pods housing 2 cm (20 mm) cannon, which meant an additional punch particularly efficient against slower flying large bombers. The *Luftwaffe* unit was primarily tasked with assisting the Bulgarians with additional firepower in defending their capital in case of an USAAF attack. In addition, the German pilots would also give a hand to their less experienced Bulgarian comrade-in-arms with training. Indeed, this was much needed, as the first impression of the German pilots was: "the Bulgarian officers were all older than us and inexperienced."

The leader of the 'Eismeer' *Jagdgruppe* was the venerable *Hauptmann* Gerhard Wengel, who had been appointed as provisional *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./JG 5 on 15 November 1943. However, many of his pilots were young, 'green' airmen, with no combat experience against the USAAF, having been stationed in Norway until mid-November 1943, then in the calm of Rumania for the next two months.

Frost barely settled on the grassy airstrip of Vrazhdebna following the Germans' arrival in force, when they were put to hard test by the Americans. The day after their arrival, a powerful USAAF formation returned to Sofia. It consisted of 142 B-17s of the 97th, 99th and 301st BGs, escort was provided by 38 P-38s of the 14th FG all along, while 44 P-47s of the 325th FG covered the retreat. In addition to the main strike force targeting Sofia, a smaller one raided the marshalling yard at Skopie. The secondary USAAF formation numbered 32 B-24s from the 449th and 450th BGs, escorted by 40 P-38s from the 82nd FG. This was the largest warplane formation to show up in Bulgarian skies thus far. The American airmen reported a record number of enemy fighters attacking them throughout the forty-minute air battle: 60. This spike in the number of the defenders was clearly due to the newly arrived *Luftwaffe* unit, which also scrambled to intercept the USAAF warplanes along with their Bulgarian comrades.

'Welcoming' the Americans were 16 Bulgarian Bf 109Gs, complemented by over 30 D.520s. The local fighters were augmented by about 24 *Luftwaffe* Bf 109Gs – a novelty in the air war over Bulgaria. First to take off were the Dewoitines of 1/6. *Orlyak*, at 11:23, which was the baptism of fire for them. They were followed by the identically equipped 2/6. *Orlyak*, at 11:40, then the *Strelas* of 3/6. *Orlyak*,



A cheery Bulgarian 'Strela' pilot, believed to be Podporuchik Evgheni Tonchev, removes his oxygen mask after returning from an interception sortie in 1944.

47 In January 1944, the aircraft park of I./JG 5 consisted of 23 fighters: 14 Bf 109G-2s, 1 Bf 109G-4 and 8 Bf 109G-6s, which was only half the theoretical strength of a standard *Jagdgruppe* (40 aircraft), plus staff.

The funeral of Kapitan Lyuben Kondakov (elevated in rank just the day prior to his premature death), killed in clash with USAAF fighters on 17 April 1944 – the ‘Black Easter Monday’ of Bulgarian fighter pilots. The coffin bearers are army (not air force) officers, possibly his former classmates from the military school, while the funeral column is flanked by teenage members of the Bulgarian paramilitary youth organization ‘Brannik’, created on 29 Dec. 1940. All men walk solemnly, with removed field caps, out of respect for their fallen hero. Cpt. Kondakov was buried in his home town of Sliven.



shortly before noontime. The Bulgarians were joined by the German ‘Gustavs’ of I./JG 5 only later, at 12:08, when they took off by ‘Alarmstart’ from Sofia-east airfield. The ‘rookie’ 4/6. *Orlyak*, training on the D.520, also joined the fray. In total, the number of defenders was almost double the number of US fighters – a rare occurrence.

The three Bf 109G-equipped *yato* of the 3/6. *Orlyak*, based at Bozhurishte, headed to Sofia airspace, at the ordered 8,000 m altitude. The *Strelas* flew in several waves, at distinct levels, the highest positioned being the 682. *Yato*, led by *Por.* Stoyan Stoyanov, at 8,500 m. Upon spotting the bomber ‘boxes’ above Trăn, at 12:10, the Bulgarian ‘109s dived upon them, cutting through the top fighter escort. *Feldfebel* Tsviatko Zagorski managed to damage one ‘Flying Fortress’, causing the bomber to leave the formation. Other pilots inflicted damage on a smaller scale. Following the top-down assault on bombers, several ferocious dogfights erupted between Axis and Allied fighters. At the end, *orlyak* commander Kapitan Chudomir Toplodolski, *yato* commander *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov and *Podporuchik* Gencho Ivanov were credited each with a downed ‘Lightning’ (1 point for each). Three more *lettsi* (Bulgarian for airmen), all *Feldfebels*, were officially acknowledged with attacking efficiently enemy fighters, without downing or seriously damaging them, though (0 point for each).

After 3/6. *Orlyak*, it was the turn of 2/6. *Orlyak* and the rookie 1/6. *Orlyak*, then of the Germans to clash with the intruders. The *Luftwaffe* flyers met the enemy at about 30 km south-west of Radomir, and engaged them in heavy air combat. Cutting through the fighter defence, the US bomber formation reached Sofia airspace at 12:23 and unloaded its deadly payload upon the marshalling yard of the Bulgarian capital and surrounding areas. Civilian quarters were hard hit again, causing many victims.

In total, the number of ‘victory points’ awarded that busy day for the entire Bulgarian fighter force reached a whopping 24! Of all these claims, the Bf 109G pilots were responsible for three two-engine fighters downed and four more attacked ‘efficiently’, as well as a damaged four-engine bomber (5 points, in total). It was a unique situation when the D.520-flying pilots outshone their Bf 109G-flying comrades, almost four times over, as regards the victory points. However, if one considers the number of warplanes shot down confirmed, the score would be much closer, namely 5 to 3 in favour of the D.520 pilots. True, the men flying the Dewoitine downed only bombers – the primary target of the defenders – while the Messerschmitt flying ones only fighters. It must be mentioned that *Luftwaffe* Bf 109G-pilots added two more confirmed claims against B-17s (an additional two remained unconfirmed), as detailed later.

On 10 January, all Bulgarian (and presumably German) anti-aircraft batteries fired at the day and night intruders. At night, searchlights were used to trace the targets, increasing the accuracy of fire. In the two (day and night) attacks, a total of 5 fighters and 6 bombers were claimed as shot down by the anti-air defence. This set the one-day wartime record for flak gunners, too.

However, the reality was totally different. Only two B-17Fs were officially lost to enemy fighters, along with a P-38G⁴⁸. Another combat damaged ‘Lightning’ of the same 14th FG, piloted by Lt. Melvin Waldrop, returned with one engine shut off, and crashed while landing on the home airfield in Italy.

48 After the big air combat of 10 January, the following crashed aircraft wrecks were reported on the ground: 1 at Yarlovo, 1 at Herakovo, 4 at Golak, 1 at Gălăbovtsi, 1 at Kladnitsa, 3 in different districts of Pernik, 1 at Radibosh and 1 at Slivnitsa. In total, 13 “US aircraft” (it was not specified if fighters, or bombers) were reported crashed in the area where the air fights took place (the places listed are villages more or less in the area of the capital). Most probably, however, several wrecks belonged to the same aircraft, and/or Axis aircraft were also reported as ‘enemy’.

A further B-17 returned home heavily damaged, with one crewmember dead, and five others wounded. Several more returned with various degree of damage (for example, of the eight B-17s of the 416th BS, all but one suffered enemy-inflicted damage! In turn, this squadron's gunners were credited with 5 'kills', out of the 35 enemy fighters which reportedly attacked them over the target).

A P-47D 'Thunderbolt' of the 325th FG was also reported missing, most probably not due to enemy fire (crashed into the south Adriatic Sea, after its engine had quit). In total, at least 11 US crewmen were KIA, 5 WIA and 12 POW⁴⁹. This was the case of a three-fold overclaim by Bulgarian fighter pilots. The Germans claimed further air victories, but only against four-engine bombers, as detailed below.

Bulgarian Messerschmitt pilots came out lightly from the mêlée. However, their D.520-flying colleagues suffered more (see page 185).

The newcomer *Luftwaffe* fighter group fared much worse than its Bulgarian counterpart. Of the about 24 Bf 109Gs that took off from Vrazhdebna at 12:08, thirteen (!) did not return, or force landed on the base airfield. The most prominent loss was the group commander himself, the 28-year-old *Hptm.* Gerhard Wengel⁵⁰. He was shot down by P-38s, which ambushed him and his comrades while they were attempting to target the 'Flying Fortresses' over Radomir (about 35 km south-west of Sofia). *Hptm.* Wengel's mount, Bf 109G-6 (W.Nr. 26051, TN+PM), marked 'Double Chevron' in black, crashed 2 km east of Radomir. *Ofw.* Walter Kalweit of the 3rd *Staffel* was wounded in his leg and had to force land on Vrazhdebna (Bf 109G-2, W.Nr. 13742, RJ+UP, 'Yellow 6'). Here is how he remembered that day: "On 10 Jan-



uary, we were involved in heavy air battles with the Americans. They scored three, or four hits on my right leg. Despite the terrible pain, I managed to escape. I decided to stop the mission and land as soon as I could. After landing, I was pulled out of the machine. My fur boot was full of blood. I was immediately taken to the hospital. After recovery, I never returned to the JG 5 again, trained instead would-be fighter pilots."

Staffelkapitän Oblt. Robert Müller of 3./JG 5 was also wounded in combat, getting splinters in the eyes and spine, he crash landed near Sofia (Bf 109G-2, W.Nr. 10323, KA+KY, 'Yellow 10'). *Ofw.* Hermann Holtkötter of the 1st *Staffel* (Bf 109G-6, W.Nr. 26038, TI+YZ, 'White 2') was wounded in his spine in an air battle at 4000 m. He bailed out and landed at Kondofrey, 17 km SW of Radomir. The wounded pilot was found by civilians, who took him to the local priest. He then drove him to the small hospital in Radomir, where Holtkötter stayed for five days.

Uffz. Scharf of the 1st *Staffel* had also to bail out of his stricken Messerschmitt at 4000 m and landed safely. Six further Bf 109Gs failed to return to the base, while two of those who managed to reach Vrazhdebna had to crash land due to technical faults. In turn, the *Luftwaffe* pilots claimed four 'Flying Fortresses' (two were eventually confirmed, the other two remained unconfirmed) by *Oblt.* Gerd Senoner, *Staffelkapitän* of 1./JG 5, *Fw.* Franz Leitner of 3./JG 5 (both confirmed), as well as *Ltn.* Franz von Thienen from Stab I./JG 5 and *Ofw.* Hermann Holtkötter from 3./JG 5 (both claims marked in the

Poruchik Dimităr Spisarevski of 3/6. Orlyak was killed in action while ramming – purposely, or unintentionally – a 'Liberator' bomber on 20 December 1943. His spectacular death instantly turned him into a national hero, being labelled «жива торпеда», i.e., 'live torpedo'. This heroic appellation is still widely used today by the patriotic Bulgarian printed and electronic media, which portray Spisarevski as symbol of the ultimate sacrifice for the homeland.

49 Bulgarian sources reported the following body count: 1 dead at Kladnitsa and buried on the spot; 1 dead at Radibosh and buried at Kostenets; 3 bodies at Golo Bardo (near Pernik); 1 burned body at Gäläbovtsi; 1 body at Slivnitsa, plus about a dozen airmen captured at various places. This count closely matches the casualties reported by the US units over Bulgaria. Only two names of fallen enemy airmen were recorded by Bulgarian authorities, namely "Leonard Laliver" (military number 31185634-142-43), remains found at Radibosh, and "Valter Klutz" (military number 34036353), remains found at Kladnitsa. Actually, they were the 22-year-old Staff Sergeant Leonard H. Larivière (ASN 31185634), crewmember of B-17F, No. 42-5170, of 99th BG, 347th BS, and the 22-year-old Staff Sergeant Walter G. Klutz (ASN 34036353), crewmember of the other lost B-17F, No. 42-5811, of 2nd BG, 20th BS.

50 Bulgarian sources claim that Wengel was the only German fighter pilot to lose his life while defending the Bulgarian airspace. This claim, however, is incorrect, as by the author's count at least seven (!) more *Luftwaffe* day fighter pilots were killed in action over Bulgaria in 1944, while fighting the Americans (several more died in accidents). This discrepancy does not detract anything of the remembrance of Wengel, who received a commemorative stone erected in Sofia on 5 November 2004. Since then, the memorial was vandalised, but was repaired and it's on display again (see colour photo on page 21). It has to be noted that erecting such a memorial to a fallen German soldier in our days is unthinkable in most European countries, regardless of the extraordinary combat deeds he may have made during the war and his lack of affiliation to the Nazi ideology. That's why – in the Author's personal view – the Bulgarians' decision to commemorate a foreign soldier (be him even German!), who died while defending their country, is commendable.



The undisputed top ranking Bulgarian fighter pilot, Podporuchik Stoyan Stoyanov, an 'ace' with 15 victory points to his tally, is resting underneath his Bf 109G-6, fitted with a drop tank, sometime in the summer of 1944. The Author is indebted to Stoyanov's son, Veselin, for the assistance he rendered to this ambitious project throughout the years.

German document as 'n.a.', i.e. *nicht anerkannt*, not confirmed) – a meagre consolation in view of the huge losses they suffered.

An American eyewitness described the loss of one of the 'Flying Fortresses', B-17F-25-VE, No. 42-5811, as follows: "Over the target, I was looking out the left waist window, because fighters had been called out. I saw an explosion and fire in the tail gunner's position of aircraft No. 811. It began to lose altitude and I noticed that it had its wheels down. The plane then slid under our aircraft. When I looked again, I saw three or four enemy fighters attacking No. 811 from all angles. I did not see any parachutes come out and soon lost sight of the plane."

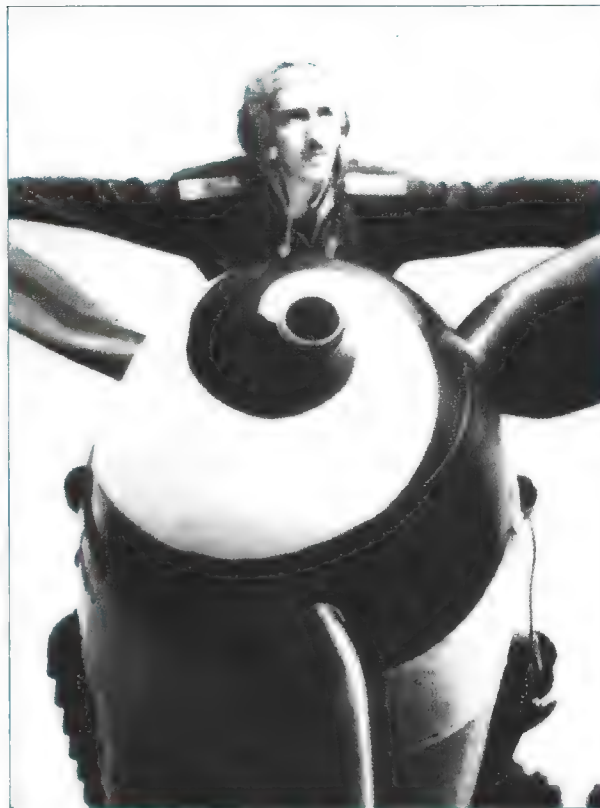
The demise of the other 'Flying Fortress', B-17F-40-BO, No. 42-5170, was described by an eyewitness, as follows: "Two minutes off the target No. 2 prop of B-17F #5170 was feathered and a few seconds later No. 3 prop was also feathered. The plane started dropping back and losing altitude fast. (...) At that time I noticed an enemy pursuit plane flying about 600 yards [500 m] from the crippled B-17. The plane continued to fly in the opposite direction from that of the formation, and then I saw four parachutes open. Shortly afterwards, the plane made another 180-deg. turn and dropped down, flying through a ravine. A few seconds later, it crashed into the side of a small hill and exploded."

The list of claims filed by US fighter pilots was quite long. Five 'Me-109s' and four 'FW-190s' were claimed as destroyed, three 'Me-109s' and two 'FW-190s' were reported as damaged, while three additional 'Me-109s' were claimed as probable. All these victory claims were located 3-4 miles north-west of Sofia, all achieved at 12:30. One 'FW-190' initially claimed as destroyed was eventually downgraded to 'probable' only. This total does not include the grossly overinflated claims filed by on-board gunners: 30 (!) destroyed and 14 probable ones⁵¹. The Germans lost 3 Bf 109Gs destroyed and 8 more damaged in combat. Two others are listed as bellied due to technical reasons. Known Bulgarian combat losses were a D.520 shot down (force landed) and a Bf 109G damaged. Thus, the US fighter pilots' overclaim ratio was 3:1, if only irretrievable losses vs. confirmed victories are counted⁵². However, if we add up *all* claims vs. *all* losses in combat, the Americans' overall number of claims matches *exactly* the losses of the Axis (17 aircraft), not counting the on-board gunners' overinflated claims.

51 For example, the following air victories were credited to B-17 gunners of the 99th BG, 347th BS: three „Me-109s" and two "Ma-200s" destroyed, one "FW-190" damaged. The "Ma-200" (i.e., Macchi MC.200) and "FW-190" could very well refer to the Dewoitine D.520.

52 As is the case with other loss vs. victories calculations, the claims submitted by the anti-aircraft artillery are not considered. If those were taken into consideration, the overclaiming ratio would be worse.

The loss of the group commander deeply impacted the morale of the decimated I./JG 5. *Hptm.* Wengel was temporarily replaced by wounded *Oblt.* Robert Müller, until *Maj.* Erich Gerlitz could take command on 25 January. The devastated *Gruppe* would not take off against the USAAF again while stationed in Bulgaria. A couple of non-combat related accident reports dated 29 January and 5 February locate I./JG 5 on Niš airfield, in the occupied Yugoslavia. Most of the embattled *Gruppe's* personnel were eventually recalled to Germany, to Obertraubling, at the



end of January/early February 1944. The bulk of 2. *Staffel* stayed a few weeks more before also retiring to the Reich. However, a few pilots of this *Staffel* remained on Vrazhdebna air base until late April, as *Ausbildungsstaffel für Bulgaren* (Training Squadron for Bulgarians). It was reported that when the bulk of the *Jagdgruppe* exited Bulgaria, they left behind their aircraft for the Bulgarians. Indeed, if one checks the monthly aircraft return list of *Luftwaffe* fighter units, I./JG 5 is mentioned for January 1944 with 13 G-2s, 1 G-4 and 7 G-6s as "*abgang an andere Verbände*" (i.e., handed over to other units). Next month, the I. *Gruppe* received 40 new Bf 109G-6s instead of those older, embattled "hand-me-downs". However, the list of Bf 109Gs received by the Bulgarians contains only six aircraft for February, including the sole G-4 ever mentioned in Bulgarian annals, the rest being G-2s. This batch of G-2s was officially handed over, for the first time, by the "German mission in Bulgaria".

There is a victory claim filed by *Feldfebel shkolnik* Dako P. Dakov of 3/6. *Orlyak* reportedly on 17 January, against a B-17. His claim was downgraded to 'heavily damaged', valuing two victory points. No further details of this event, in fact of the whole activity that day, is available. The summary chronology of the 15th USAAF does not mention any combat mission over Bulgaria for that day, which is puzzling. Therefore, Dakov's claim was actually filed on another day, most probably on 17 April, and the entry in the official list of Bulgarian air victories is erroneous.

The final raid of the month against Bulgarian targets took place on the 24th. A bomber 'party', made of 59 B-24s, with the usual P-38 escort (78 aircraft), paid an unannounced 'visit' to Skopje, including its airfield used jointly by the VNVV and the *Luftwaffe*. US airmen reported encounters with a total of 15–20 'Me-109s', 'FW-190s' and even 'Mc-202s' over the area. Bomber crewmembers claimed four enemy fighters. The 'Lightning' pilots filed claims for two destroyed and one probable Axis fighter. A 'Liberator' of the 450th BG and two 'Lightnings' of the 82nd FG were lost in combat to enemy aircraft, while a 'Flying Fortress' of the 301st BG fell to flak. Another 'Fortress' of the 99th BG was listed as missing due to unknown cause (actually crashed at Trstenik). Finally, a B-17 crewman, 2nd Lt. Glenn N. Hodges, from the 2nd BG, was killed by a 20-mm shell fired by an enemy fighter, while two others aboard were wounded. The bomber managed to return to base.

Besides acknowledged combat casualties, a large number of losses were inflicted by other causes. Briefly, five (!) B-17s of the 2nd BG were lost due to fuel starvation (a couple of them had already been damaged by fighters), another one was struck by falling bombs (crashed 35 km north of Skopje).

From Skopje air base, 16 Bf 109Gs of IV./JG 27 took-off and engaged the 'Liberators' near Prizren. One of the attackers rammed a B-24H, 'Liberal Lady', smashing its right stabilizer and rudder. Reportedly, the starboard wing of the attacking *Gustav* ripped off, and she was seen spinning downwards. The damaged bomber was able to return to Amendola, Italy, with all crewmembers safe. Seven more 'Liberators' were damaged in the fray, but remained airworthy and could return to their base.

Above, left: Podporuchik Marinopolski, wearing his trademark coloured scarf, poses in the cabin of his Bf 109G-6. Notice the partly visible German language service writing underneath the cabin, spelling: "Beim Schließen der Kabine auf Vorderteil Gummirahmen achten!" (While closing the cockpit canopy, pay attention to the front part of the rubber frame!).

Above: Podporuchik Todor N. Rozev of 672. Yato strikes a 'Titanic' pose atop his 'Gustav'. Rozev ended the war with three victory points, awarded for the 'Liberator' downed on 11 June 1944. He claimed a 'Mustang' on 26 August, which was not confirmed, though. In total, he performed 23 combat sorties against the Americans and 21 against the Germans. Rozev published his heavily censored memoirs in 1957, with the scene depicting his sole air victory featured on the book cover (see page 76).



The so-called Erla cockpit canopy identifies the Strela sub-type as a late production G-6. The aircraft's illegible fuselage number (1, 4, or 7) appears to be white (not outlined).

95th FS pilots claimed two damaged fighters, a Bf 109 and an 'FW-190' (sic!), while their comrades from the 96th FS claimed a 'Me-109' and an 'FW-190' destroyed, another 'FW-190' probable and a 'Me-109' damaged. A P-38F, 43-2123, of the 96th FS was shot down over Central Macedonia, 1st Lt. Thomas M. Judd being captured, as was 2nd Lt. Robert E. Schultz of the 97th FS, who flew in P-38G, 43-2501. The 1st FG had its share of the action, 1st Lt. Donald Kienholz of the 94th FS claimed a Bf 109 destroyed.

According to German records, only one Bf 109G-6 was lost and its pilot survived. Four claims were submitted by IV./JG 27 on that day: a B-24 west of Skopie at 12:25 by *Hptm.* Otto Meyer from *Gruppe*, one P-38 each⁵³ south-southeast of Skopie at 12:30 by *Uffz.* Werner Dittmann and *Uffz.* Walter Rabenstein of the 10th *Staffel*, and a B-24 awarded to the whole *Gruppe* 10 km west of Tetovo, west of Skopie (within the boundaries of the wartime "Tsarstvo Bălgariya", i.e., Bulgarian Tsardom).

Another, larger bomber 'party', made up of 114 B-17s of the 5th BW, covered by 64 P-47s of the 325th FG, bombed targets of opportunity, as their primary target, Sofia, was completely covered by thick cloud. For example, the 416th BS's B-17s returned home without dropping their ordnance due to the target being overcast. About 15 Bf 109Gs attacked a flight of B-17 of the 2nd BG separated from the fighter escort. Bomber gunners claimed four destroyed and two more probable. About ten minutes later, another pack of Bf 109Gs, around ten aircraft, jumped another 'Fortress' flight of the 2nd BG. The 'Fortresses' came under persistent attacks by two separate groups of Bf 109Gs, one being from 12./JG 27, which took-off from Podgoritsa airfield (Montenegro), while the another from III./JG 27, which came from Devoli (Albania). Two B-17s and a B-24 were claimed by JG 27 pilots. No *Luftwaffe* fighter was lost, although on-board gunners claimed a total of five Bf 109s destroyed and three more probable.

P-38 pilots claimed one 'Me-109' and two additional 'FW-190s' (one of the latter right over Sofia airfield), while two 'Me-109s' and one 'FW-190' was considered as damaged only. An 'FW-190' claim remained probably only. All claimed victories were achieved between 12:15-12:30 over Sofia, except for the one over the airfield, which was scored between 13:30-13:50. No loss to enemy fighters was recorded by *Luftwaffe* annals, however. Bulgarian Bf 109Gs did not take off due to low visibility, no trace of their activity was found in the documents available to the Author.

Gearing Up for 'Total Confrontation'

Following the disastrous raid of 24 January (8 B-17s, 1 B-24 and 2 P-38s lost, many more damaged), the USAAF conducted no more air raids against Bulgaria in the following nine weeks. This much-needed respite was put to good use by Bulgarian fighter pilots, who honed their flying skills and further improved their air combat tactics with the help of the Germans. In several pilot's logbooks consulted by the Author, training flights aboard *Luftwaffe* marked Go 145 biplane trainers, with German instructors in the

⁵³ Indeed, there were two 'Lightnings' of the 96th FS, 82nd FG lost 30 miles NE of Skopie (Nos. 43-2123 and 43-2501), both pilots ended up as POWs.

back seat, are logged. Such training flights were noted, for example, by *Ppor.* Viktor D. Atanasov, aboard a Gotha identified as DD+VO, with German instructor Zimmer, starting from 10 March. Based on his logbook, *Ppor.* Asen P. Gigov also logged training flights aboard the same DD+VO, from 8 March on. Then, from the last day of the month, he performed solo flights aboard the same *Luftwaffe* Gotha. Fighter pilot *Ppor.* Stefan N. Marinopolski's logbook is testimony for the same procedure, starting at the same day as Atanasov, only that the Go 145 is identified as KO+AT. The major difference is that this time the instructors were Bulgarians, namely V. Atanasov, Barev, Stoichev, T. Atanasov and N. Stoyanov.

Parallel to additional training of pilots, the fighter command structure was unified and streamlined; all fighter units active over Bulgaria were now subordinated to *Jagdabschnittsführer Bulgarien*⁵⁴. This *Luftwaffe* high unit, loosely translated as Fighter Command Section Bulgaria, was headquartered at Boyana, in the southern outskirts of Sofia. From this central command post the air defence activity of the Balkans was guided and co-ordinated. It was subordinated to *Jagdfliegerführer Balkan*, under command of *Obstlt.* Bernhard Woldenga. On 19 January, *Hptm.* Karl Heinz Rammelt was named leader. He stayed in this position until 5 April, but would soon return to Bulgaria heading a *Jagdgruppe*, as mentioned later on. Rammelt was replaced by the experienced *Obstlt.* Alfred W. Müller⁵⁵, who stayed until the unit's disbandment on 3 September due to the Bulgarians' about-face. In addition, *Obstlt.* Gustav Pressler was also transferred to the *Deutsche Lw.-Mission in Bulgarien* in April, and appointed as *Ausbildungsleiter* (training leader) with the Bulgarian Air Force.

Some *Luftwaffe* fighter units stayed in Bulgaria in the late winter. A confidential intelligence report forwarded to the US Embassy in Istanbul, Turkey, on 8 April, by a 'reliable source', mentions that in a time period prior to 2nd March "there now are 60 German fighters at Vrajdebna airdrome". Of course, the reliability of this spy report is questionable; nonetheless, it is testimony of *Luftwaffe* fighter activity on that particular airfield. The report continues on in stating: "Morale has been greatly affected by the air raids. The general opinion is that if the raids had continued, Bulgaria would have been obliged to sue for peace." Another similar intelligence report originating from the same source, penned by an informer 'believed reliable', who returned from Sofia on 16 December 1943, who had visited 'Bojourishte airdrome', "noticed the remarkably poor quality of the machines stationed there; they were all old types". He/she continued writing: "when a raid occurs, never more than 20 German planes take to the air, but always before the Bulgarian planes". Again, the value of the information contained in such a spy report is questionable.

In the meantime, delivery of Bf 109G-2s already contracted in the previous year continued unabated. The following deliveries were recorded for January: one on the 12th (delivered by *Ppor.* Grigorov), another one on the 13th (by *Ppor.* Demirov), two more on the 14th (by *Ppor.* Bonev and Dimitrov Ivanov), again two more on 16th, three additional ones on the 27th and a final eight on the 30th. These aircraft were not impressed in service immediately, but gradually. Some were allocated to 2/6. *Orlyak* for training. All these fighters were a welcome addition to be able to replace losses in combat and training.

Number of combat-ready aircraft and aircrew available to 3/6. *Orlyak* in January 1944*:

| Date | 1.01 | 9.01 | 10.01 | 13.01 | 31.01 |
|----------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Aircraft | 13 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 26 |
| Aircrew | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 22 |

*only those dates are listed when there was a change in the numbers

After 3/6. *Orlyak* had been completely equipped and trained on the Bf 109G by the end of 1943, it was the turn of 2/6. *Orlyak* to follow course. Initially, the *Shtab*, as well as the 642nd and 652nd *Yata* (all based at Karlovo) switched from D.520 to the Bf 109G, starting from early January 1944. The last *yato* to convert was the 662nd, based at Skopie. Order of battle of 9 March 1944 – coming from German sources – lists II. *Jagdgruppe* (i.e., 2/6. *Orlyak*), with four (!) *Staffeln* (actually *yata*), based at 'Wraschdebna', equipped with a mix of Bf 109G and 'Devoitine'. The sister squadron, III. *Jagdgruppe* (i.e., 3/6. *Orlyak*), curiously made also of four *Staffeln*, based at 'Bojurishte', was completely equipped with the Bf 109G.

Conversion training from the obsolescent French D.520 to the modern German Bf 109G did not go without sweat, pain and blood. The first recorded accident featured *Podporuchik* Georgi Hristov Gochev



Podporuchik Drandiyski poses in front of the newly delivered 'Strela'. The Author could not find trace of any fighter pilot called Drandiyski, only reconnaissance pilot *Ppor.* Petăr Drandiyski of 343. *Orlyak*, flying Focke-Wulf Fw 189As in 1944. The white triangle on mid-fin reveals the identity of the 'Strela': 133/7057, which was 'Green 1' (outlined in white) – see colour artwork on page 139.

54 Formed officially on 7 February 1944, from *Stab/Jagdfliegerführer Griechenland*, subordinated to *Jagdfliegerführer Balkan*.

55 An 'old hand', the 49-year-old Müller, nick-named 'Kugelblitz', was credited with 3 air victories (plus 2 in WW I)!





Photos on previous page. The DB 605A-1 engine, manufactured by Henschel-Flugmotorenbau GmbH, Kassel (code 'hsr'), of what is believed to be from Ppor. Todor Rozev's doomed mount, shot down in air combat on 24 June 1944, was recovered from a 3 metres deep watery hole nearby Maritsa village, on 12 May 2018. After the muddy engine was cleaned on the spot of recovery, the original construction number revealed itself: 01102238. That very day the engine was recovered and the information reached the Author, he could locate a write-off document where this number was listed, along with eight more ones, all written off officially on 25 August 1944. A Bulgarian researcher links the engine to the airframe's construction number 760242 and Bulgarian serial number 130 (included in the aforementioned write-off list). However, in the Author's list (see Annex), this particular *Werknummer*, which belonged to a 'Gustav' handed over on 21 June 1944 – thus just three days prior to this particular event – should have received a much higher Bulgarian serial number, around 154. The Author believes that 130 could be the correct serial number, but the airframe's construction number was different, possibly 165024. More research is needed to establish the true identity of this 'Strela'. Notice on the close-up photo the bullet hole in the engine side. The photo above, left, depicts the coveted 'trophy' of the recovery team: the elaborated factory emblem, still well-known today. "A dream come true", as the person holding the emblem in his muddy hand described the feeling. The final photo (above, right) shows a detail of the 20 mm calibre MG 151 engine-mounted cannon. The three letters 'eeo' identify the manufacturer: Deutsche Waffen und Munitionsfabriken AG (DWM), Posen plant. (photos N. Katsarov)

from the 2/6. *Orlyak*, who lost critical speed and crashed to the ground at Vrazhdebna airfield on 27 January (other, less probable, date: 5 March)⁵⁶. The pilot was killed, and his machine written off.

The next recorded incident was caused by *Feldfebel shkolnik* Radoslav Dimitrov Raykov of 3/6. *Orlyak*, who crashed his Messerschmitt '109 during take-off at 15:20 on 2 February. Luckily, he survived, but his mount was a write-off. *Feldf.* Raykov was later transferred to the short-lived 4/6. *Orlyak*. Two days later, while 'green' pilots familiarised themselves with the *Gustav*, *Kandidat podofitser* Kiril Hr. Stoyanov had to belly land west of the Gurmazovo village due to engine failure.

The top fighter *orlyak*'s next incident was a fatal one. It involved *Ofitserski kandidat* Stefan Takov Iliev, who could not gain enough speed after take-off and fell back to the ground near the Automobile School on 5 February⁵⁷. Another dead pilot, another written off '109. A list of fallen Bulgarian airmen mentions *Podporuchik* Lyubomir Tsvētkov⁵⁸ Iliev of the 6th Air *Polk* as having died at Bozhurishte airfield on 2 February (another source gives the date of his death as 1 February). The circumstances of his death are unclear, but most probably it was yet another case of deadly piloting accident. There is also a remote possibility that the two Ilievs are actually the same person, despite the many discrepancies, including their ranks, coming from various sources.

The next fatal catastrophe involved two Bf 109G students, *Kapitan* Zemen Todorov Dimitrov (who had been elevated in rank just the previous day)⁵⁹ and *Feldfebel* Tsonyu Pärvanov Uzunov, both of 2/6. *Orlyak*. While manoeuvring in close formation, the two collided in mid-air. Neither of them could

⁵⁶ A crash report summary dated 15.03.1945 details the destruction of Gochev's mount, identifying it as 'Strela G-2', No. 13918, which crashed at Vrazhdebna at 10 o'clock. However, the incident's date is given as 5 March 1944. The date of 27.01.1944 is according to several other sources, including the Bulgarian journal 'Vestnik VVS' and the list of dead Bulgarian soldiers.

⁵⁷ The combat diary of 3/6. *Orlyak* gives the details as mentioned, and is considered by the Author as the correct one.

⁵⁸ His middle name is also given by other sources as Tsvetanov.

⁵⁹ In the official crash investigation document his rank is still given as *Poruchik*. In a list of fallen airmen, the date of his death is given as 23.03.1944.

recover his aircraft before crashing to the ground at Vrazhdebna airfield, on 23 February, at 9 o'clock in the morning. Both Bf 109Gs (Uzunov's W.Nr. 13742⁶⁰, a G-2, and Dimitrov's W.Nr. 16237, also given in the write-off document issued on 15.03.1945 as a G-2, despite being a G-4 based on the factory W.Nr. were destroyed. The latter *Strela* crashed the morning after it was officially taken over, hence it had no NN.

Despite the painful accidents with loss of men and matériel, the conversion training of the hard-hit 2/6. *Orlyak* had to go on and did go on. This was in expectation of further USAAF raids, which were only a matter of time. During a combat drill held at Vrazhdebna airfield on 17 March, 2/6. *Orlyak* could send up 35 fighters, of which 19 were Bf 109Gs. This was possible due to the arrival of more Bf 109Gs. A German document summing up exports to friendly countries lists 43 Bf 109G-2s as delivered to Bulgaria by February 1944. Six more, of the newer G-6 sub-type, were handed over on 29 March, three more G-6s on the 30th and another three G-6s on the last day of the month⁶¹. With these – the aforementioned document states – a total of 55 Bf 109Gs had been delivered to Bulgaria in 1944, including two replacement aircraft. The newer and more potent Bf 109G-6s⁶² were allocated to the top fighter unit of the VNVV, 3/6. *Orlyak*. They complemented the existing serviceable Bf 109G-2s, while the remaining Bf 109G-2s went to the other units under forming (primarily 2/6. *Orlyak*).

Fatal losses during training and drills did not avoid 3/6. *Orlyak* in the month of March, either. First, it was *Podporuchik* Boris Panov Sibirski who died on the 21st (a comprehensive list of fallen Bulgarian military personnel gives the day as the 23rd) during a botched crash landing at Ilyantsi, on the northern outskirts of Sofia, after the engine of his mount had stopped in mid-air. Four days later, it was the turn of *Feldfebel* (another source gives *Podofitser*) Milko Zhelev Ivanov⁶³ of 682. *Yato* to pay with his life for stalling, then falling into a 'corkscrew' he could not disengage from. He crashed to his death at Petarch village, near Sofia, and was buried in Varna.

Order of Battle of 2/6. *Orlyak* planned on 28 March 1944, effective on 8 April 1944

| | |
|--|---|
| Commanding Officer: <i>Kapitan</i> Nikolay S. Boshnakov | <i>Feldfebel</i> Todor I. Latov (pilot) |
| <u>642. <i>Yato</i></u> | <i>Podofitser</i> Kiril I. Kălvachev (pilot) |
| <i>Poruchik</i> Viktor E. Pavlov (<i>yato</i> commander) | <i>Podofitser</i> Simeon V. Penchev (pilot) |
| <i>Poruchik</i> Dimităr S. Popov (<i>krilo</i> leader) | <i>Podofitser</i> Atanas A. Krăstev (pilot) |
| <i>Podporuchik</i> Nikola N. Nachev (<i>krilo</i> leader) | <i>Podofitser</i> Boris I. Vodenicharov (pilot) |
| <i>Podporuchik</i> Georgi D. Georgiev (<i>krilo</i> leader) | <u>662. <i>Yato</i></u> |
| <i>Podporuchik</i> Panyu A. Kraevski (pilot) | <i>Poruchik</i> Asen D. Kovachev (<i>yato</i> commander) |
| <i>Podporuchik</i> Petăr K. Petrov (pilot) | <i>Poruchik</i> Kiril S. Andonov (<i>krilo</i> leader) |
| <i>Feldfebel</i> Atanas A. Matev (pilot) | <i>Podporuchik</i> Veselin N. Rachev (<i>krilo</i> leader) |
| <i>Feldfebel</i> Atanas I. Petrov (pilot) | <i>Podporuchik</i> Emil G. Stoytsev (<i>krilo</i> leader) |
| <i>Podofitser</i> Georgi I. Kolev (pilot) | <i>Podporuchik</i> Asen P. Gigov (pilot) |
| <i>Kand. Podofitser</i> Nayden H. Gogov (pilot) | <i>Podporuchik</i> Nayden P. Stoyanov (pilot) |
| <u>652. <i>Yato</i></u> | <i>Podporuchik</i> Vladimir A. Aleksandrov (pilot) |
| <i>Poruchik</i> Nedělcho D. Bonchev (<i>yato</i> commander) | <i>Podporuchik</i> Viktor D. Atanasov (pilot) |
| <i>Podporuchik</i> Stefan N. Marinopolski (<i>krilo</i> leader) | <i>Podporuchik</i> Ivan T. Ivanov (pilot) |
| <i>Podporuchik</i> Dimităr A. Dimitrov (<i>krilo</i> leader) | <i>Podporuchik</i> Anton I. Barev (pilot) |
| <i>Podporuchik</i> Krum H. Atanasov (<i>krilo</i> leader) | <i>Ofitser Kand.</i> Veselin S. Terziev (pilot) |
| <i>Podporuchik</i> Hristo I. Petrov (pilot) | <i>Podofitser</i> Georgi N. Atanasov (pilot) |

Number of aircraft and aircrew available to 3/6. *Orlyak* in late March 1944 (total/combat ready):

| Date | 29.03 | 30.03 | 31.03 |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| Aircraft | ??/23 | 37/22 | 37/19 |
| Aircrew | 41/22 | 39/22 | 39/21 |

60 It's worth noting that W.Nr. 13742 was earlier the mount of *Ofw.* Walter Kalweit of the 3./JG 5, which was slightly damaged in combat on 10 January 1944. The aircraft was left behind to the Bulgarians when the bulk of this *Luftwaffe Jagdgruppe* moved away at the end of January.

61 An invoice sent by the *Wirtschaftsgruppe Luftfahrt-Industrie, Ausland-Abteilung*, located in Berlin, to the Bulgarian War Ministry, dated 31 March 1944, lists five DB 605 A-1 engines delivered to Bulgaria on 13 November 1943, with constr. numbers as follows: 37165, 37054, 37222, 27492 and 37172.

62 Little known fact is that some of these G-6s (the Author counted thirteen) were manufactured in Hungary, at MWG Plant in Győr.

63 A list of fallen airmen gives Ivanov as his middle name and Zhelev as his last name – a common occurrence of mixing up middle and last names.

The Americans Return in Force

After a nine-week lull in combat activity, the Americans returned to Bulgaria in force on 30 March. That morning – with the reorganisation of the VNVV fighter arm still incomplete – USAAF warplanes showed up earlier than usual. It was the strongest air raid Sofia had yet to see. The bomber force comprised 114 B-17s of the 5th Bomber Wing and 252 B-24s of the 47th and 304th Bomber Wings, while the fighter escort was 96 P-38s of the 1st, 14th and 82th Fighter Groups, as well as 24 P-47s of the 325th Fighter Group. These amounted to an unprecedented number of 486 USAAF warplanes dotting the clear skies of Bulgaria.

To combat the many intruders, the Bulgarian defenders also scrambled a record number of fighters: 80, namely 39 Bf 109Gs⁶⁴, 37 D.520s and 4 Avia B-135s. The experienced 3/6. *Orlyak* threw into battle 20 Messerschmitts from all of its three *yata*, while the freshly trained 2/6. *Orlyak* sent another 19⁶⁵, belonging to two of its *yata*. It has to be noted that by the end of March 1944, the *Luftwaffe* fighter units stationed in Bulgaria (I./JG 5, as well as *Stab* and IV./JG 27) had left the country and the immediate vicinity, as the situation in the *Reich* became desperate, prompting the recall of all ‘dispensable’ fighters stationed abroad. Therefore, the Bulgarian pilots were left alone in defending their homeland against the increasing number of American warplanes.

As mentioned in the opening paragraph, that day, the USAAF warplanes penetrated Bulgarian airspace earlier than usual. However, the German early warning system was in place and alerted the headquarters of the incoming danger. The Bf 109Gs of the 3/6. *Orlyak* lifted off the runway of Bozhurishte at 9:35. The fighters thrown into combat by the 2/6. *Orlyak* left Vrazhdebna air base a few minutes earlier⁶⁶.

First to engage the enemy was the 3/6. *Orlyak*. From the altitude of 8,000 m where they gathered in waiting for the Americans, the Bulgarians dived upon them at high speed, singling out the primary target, the bombers, as usual. The commanding officer of the 692. *Yato*, *Poruchik* Lyuben Kondakov, managed to score hits on one of the B-17s cruising below (2 points). Another ‘Fortress’ received hits from a *dvoyka* made by *Podporuchik* Ivan Stefanov and his wingman, *Feldfebel shkolknik* Tsvetan Gruev (1 point each). After the firing pass made by the 692. *Yato*, it was the turn of the 672. *Yato*, led by *Podporuchik* Boris Damev, to leave its mark. The *troyka* headed by Damev, who flew with *Podporuchik* Marin Tsvētkov and *Podporuchik* Mihail Grigorov as companions, attacked three B-17s, damaging all of them (2 points each). Even more daring was the rookie *Podporuchik* Hristo Kostakev, who took off on his own initiative, being grounded due to illness – a heavy case of angina. He approached a lone flying ‘Fortress’ at close range before releasing his full firepower upon it. The shells must have hit the payload, as the bomber exploded in mid-air. The huge fireball reportedly engulfed another bomber flying close, which was destroyed as well. The double score earned the young Bulgarian pilot two full victories, amounting to six points – a unique occurrence in a single air combat!

However, while *Ppor.* Kostakev was still reeling from his unexpected double victory, flying debris from the doomed ‘Fortresses’ punctured the cooling system of his ‘109. The engine soon stalled, forcing the Bulgarian to belly land his powerless mount. As he started to glide, he looked around for a proper place to land. In doing so, he failed to spot some telegraph poles along a road. In the split second before impacting one of the poles, the pilot made a wild manoeuvre to avoid collision. However, the port wing hit the ground, broke off, sending what was left of the ‘109 cartwheeling on the field. When the twisted airframe finally rested on the ground at Breznik, near Kosharevo, miraculously the pilot could exit without any major injury – testimony of the sturdy construction of Willy Messerschmitt’s design. It was *Ppor.* Kostakev’s big day. First, he scored by luck a double victory that earned him six points – an



A Bulgarian fighter pilot uses this freshly delivered Bf 109G-6 – featuring a tall tail, but standard tail wheel and cockpit canopy – as background for a souvenir shot, sometime in 1944. There is one matching entry in the (incomplete) master list of Bf 109Gs delivered to Bulgaria to a Stamm-kennzeichen ending in EB: NR+EB, which was W.Nr. 165094.

64 It has to be noted that a similarly numerous, but slightly smaller, Bf 109G formation took off for combatting the Americans only once thus far, during the ill-fated combined first Bulgarian-German combat mission of 10 January.

65 Four Bf 109Gs of 2/6. *Orlyak* were damaged on Vrazhdebna air base during the previous day’s night raid.

66 The combat diary of 2/6. *Orlyak* consulted by the Author at DVIA – which lists only the main events of the fighter group’s activity between 10 December 1943 and 27 July 1944, thus it is believed to be only a ‘sanitised’ version, compiled and typed post-war – mentions the takeoff taking place at 08:30 and landing at 10:00, but this is too early (09:30 and 11:00, rather). One possible explanation is that in the Boyana fighter command centre – located 8 km south of the centre of Sofia – the German time was used, which was 1 hour earlier than Bulgaria’s.



Above: Podporuchik Veselin S. Tenev of 3/6. Orlyak stops for a moment in the cabin of his 'Strela' so his portrait photo can be taken. The large stylised Cyrillic letters BT, i.e., VT, embroidered on his sweater, are the initials of his name.

Above, right: Podofitser Simeon Penchev is leaning against the propeller blade of the 'Strela' of Podporuchik Veselin Tenev. He is fully dressed in a typical Axis pilot's apparel, which was worn even in the so-called anti-German air campaign and afterwards. Of special interest is the dancing woman's figure Tenev painted on his aircraft's spinner. Reportedly, 'Vesko' Tenev – having artist's veins and also being flamboyant – said: "others painted lions, devils, and further dominant figures on their airplanes, I wanted two lewd women spinning in front of me."

unparalleled feat among Bulgarian fighter pilots – then he escaped alive from a horrendous crash. He would never score another victory point, but this double 'kill' propelled him to the 11th place in the official list of Bulgarian fighter pilots. He was awarded with the 'Order of Bravery' IVth Grade, IInd Class.

Thus far, except for Kostakev's machine, the Bulgarians emerged unscathed from the skirmish, bagging several victories. However, the 'Lightnings' were waiting for them upon their exit from attacking the bomber 'box'. Now everywhere 'dogfighting' Bf 109Gs and P-38s could be seen. Everyone was trying to score the fatal shot against the opponent, while avoiding being hit. *Podporuchik* Damev lost the dogfight with a 'Lightning', but managed to belly land at Herakovo. However, *Feldfebel* Koev was not so lucky, he did not make it alive. His Bf 109G was wrecked by several P-38s and crashed at Gălăbnik, located between Pernik and Dupnitsa, burying the pilot underneath the pile of twisted metal. Nicknamed 'Gärmidolov', veteran of six air battles in 14 combat sorties, officially credited with four victory points (another source gives seven), Koev died on his 31st birthday. He was promoted posthumously to *Podporuchik*, and was buried in his native village of Shipka, with full military honours.

Upon the arrival of the latecomer 2/6. *Orlyak*, flying a mix of Bf 109Gs and D.520s, the air battle intensified. Group commander, *Kapitan* Nikolay Boshnakov, managed to score good hits on a bomber, earning him 2 points. Two *Podporuchitsi*, Viktor Atanasov and Hristo Petrov, also targeted an enemy bomber each. Atanasov reportedly knocked his target out of the sky over Kyustendil, getting full credit for the victory (3 points)⁶⁷, while his comrade, Petrov, was assigned with 2 points for damaging the attacked bomber. Another Bf 109G-pilot, *Poruchik* Nedëlcho Bonchev, was credited with the destruction of a 'Fortress', which crashed west of Pernik (3 points).

Another bomber was damaged by several 3/6. *Orlyak* pilots, so at the end the credit (2 points) went to the entire group – a unique occurrence in assigning group air victory by the VNVV HQ. *Podporuchik* Gencho Ivanov was credited with a downed 'Lightning', whose pilot bailed out (1 point). Eventually, the Bulgarian defenders ran low on fuel and had to break combat to land in time. They reported impressive results, but at the end could not prevent the Americans bombing Sofia with good effect.

In total, the Bf 109G pilots were credited with four 'Fortresses' downed and eight others damaged. Additionally, a destroyed 'Lightning' was also added to their overall tally. All these victories earned them a total of 29 points – a record for Bulgarian Bf 109G pilots. Anti-aircraft artillery gunners were credited with three confirmed and a dozen unconfirmed aircraft shot down.

However, when these claims are compared to the actual losses of the Americans, a clear picture of overclaiming emerges. Only four bombers (three B-17s – two collided, probably caused by *Ppor.* Kostakev, and a third one crashed due to mechanical fault – and a single B-24) were lost, along with a P-38

⁶⁷ Unfortunately, Atanasov's logbook ends on 22 March 1944, so no details of this event can be traced in it.

(whose pilot was killed in action). As the 'Lightning' was most probably downed by a D.520, only the four actually lost bombers have to be pitched against the 6+9 claims filed by Bulgarian fighter pilots, plus those by the anti-aircraft artillery crews.

The US fighter pilots filed for an impressive number of claims following the raid. Of the grand total of ten confirmed and five probable victories, completed by eleven damaged ones, two 'Me-109s' were confirmed over Sofia and a third one – expressly mentioned as Bf 109G – over Slivnitsa. More 'kills' were reported over Leskovats (part of German-occupied Serbia, located just adjacent to the wartime borders of the Kingdom of Bulgaria), namely one confirmed victory and four 'Me-109s' or 'D.520s', marked as damaged. When compared to actual Bf 109G losses suffered by the Bulgarians (one destroyed and two damaged), plus four D.520s downed, a clear picture of overclaiming emerges from the US side as well, however, at a higher ratio than the Bulgarian overclaims.

The USAAF after-mission combat report specifies the following of the Bulgarian interception efforts: "About 20 aircraft were encountered. Mostly Me 109 and FW 190 (sic!), and from 30/40 by the escort. The enemy attacks were aggressive, but not experienced."

The official logbook of the 450th BG gives the following account of the events: "Mission Nr. 41. Target: Sofia, Bulgaria – Marshalling Yard. (...) IV. Enemy resistance. A. Fighters: While still nineteen minutes from the target and flying cruising formation, one enemy aircraft was spotted about two miles ahead of the formation just under the tops of the clouds. It did not attack, and no other aircraft were seen until target was reached. There the encounters reached the height of their intensity with seven recorded attacks on our aircraft. They were made with thirteen ships: 11 ME-109's and 2 FW-190's. Attacks were not coordinated but were made singly from between 4 and 6 o'clock low. In general, the tactics were to close within 300–400 yards and break away in a diving turn. There was only one real aggressive attack made by a FW-190 who closed to within 200 yards and was shot down. All attacks were broken off in this area at 1006 hours. The next enemy aircraft to be seen were over the Skoplje area where seven ME-109's were sighted coming from the rear and who broke formation to make two individual passes at the rear of our formation. These attacks could scarcely be called encounters as they were wide swings at about 800 yards from 4 to 6 o'clock level. Two of the ME-109's were painted yellow and green on the underside with a yellow band extending back from the cockpit. Others had yellow wing tips, black propeller tips and silver wings and fuselages. One FW-190 had a yellow and black checkered nose. Our claims are as follows: 1 FW-190 destroyed and 2 ME-109's probably destroyed."

The Americans performed no more raids against Bulgarian targets for over two weeks. They concentrated on Rumania instead. However, the route towards the vital Ploesti oilfields in Rumania led through Bulgaria – both ways. Bulgarian fighter pilots took the chance of catching unescorted bombers, some already damaged, on their way back to their base and swarmed them. Such opportunities occurred on 4 and 5 April, respectively (on 31 March, the 19 scrambled *Strelas* of 3/6. *Orlyak* could not catch the enemy and had to land at Karlovo with an unfinished job. Moreover, one of the aircraft broke a wheel and a wing during a botched landing).

On the first occasion, the 4th, all four fighter *orlyatsi* of the 6. *Polk* (regiment) took off in full force, including 23 Bf 109Gs of the 2/6. (take-off at 13:40) and 24 Bf 109Gs of the 3/6. (including newly delivered G-6s). 46 D.520s – a daily peak – joined them. A record 93 fighters in total – probably the most Bulgarian fighters that were ever up in the air in a real alarm. Despite the impressive show of force, the achieved result was rather meagre: one B-24 shot down, which crashed at Zayechar (3 points) and another one set on fire (2 points)⁶⁸. Both successes were awarded to the same D.520 pilot of 2/6. *Orlyak*, *Podporuchik* Petăr K. Petrov (in reality, no USAAF warplane was lost over Bulgaria that day). All the other 92 pilots landed empty handed. *Ppor.* Bonev's *Strela* of 682. *Yato* was hit in the cooling system by on-

| Qualitative und quantitative ÜBERNAHMEBESTÄTIGUNG. | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Es wird hiermit bestatigt, dass das MESSERSCHMITT-Flugzeug | | | |
| Me 109 G-6 | | | |
| Muster: | Me 109 G-6 | Werk-Nr.: | 16 33 21 V |
| Hersteller: | Messerschmitt G.m.b.H. Regensburg | | |
| Motor: | D.B. 605 A-1 | Werk-Nr.: | 00 20 01 96 |
| Luftschraube: | V.D.M. | Werk-Nr.: | 09505 |
| Gewichte: | Leergewicht: 2330 kg | Gesamtlast: 870 kg | Fluggewicht: 3200 kg |
| Zustand: | Fabrikneu und flugklar | | |
| heute gemäss beifolgendem Verzeichnis der "losen Teile" und Papiere in ordnungsgemessenem Zustande an den Halter: | | | |
| Koenigl. Bulg. Kriegsministerium, Luftwaffe, Sofia | | | |
| uebergeben wurde. | | | |
| Das Flugzeug wurde vor der Uebergabe nochmals einer Fremdkoerper- und Flugbetriebskontrolle unterzogen. | | | |
| Befund: | Ohne | | |
| Fertigungspruefer | | Flugzeugfuehrer | |
| F. d. Bauaufsicht | | | |
| Sofia, den | | Sofia, den 27 VII 44 | |
| MESSERSCHMITT A.G. | | | |
| Bukarester Buero | | | |
| Antioz | | Ing. Sauerhoff | |

Aircraft Übernahmebestätigung (take-over certificate) for Bf 109G-6, W.Nr. 163321 (originally Stkz. RQ+EG), signed by the German and Bulgarian parties on 27 July 1944. All technical details related to this particular, brand new 'Gustav' built at Regensburg are included in the document. Interestingly, the Messerschmitt AG representative was located in Bucharest (Rumania), not Sofia.

68 Additionally, I.A.R. 81C pilot *Adj. av.* Aurel Țifrea of Gr. 1 vîn., Esc. 43 vîn. ARR, also claimed a B-24 in Bulgarian airspace.



Scenic shot of 'White 2' that landed on a neatly trimmed field of grass. Local women gather around the unexpected visitor and military men.

The identity of this 'Strela-G', which is possibly also depicted on page 28, bottom, was 75/7057.

board gunners, but he could 'nurse' his mount back to Bozhurishte base. Another alarm was sounded only ten minutes after the last fighter landed, at 15:00. The refuelled fighters of 2/6. *Orlyak* took off minutes later, but landed at 16:10 without any noteworthy result to report.

The following day, the 5th, Bulgarian fighters preyed again on stragglers returning from Rumania. This time, 83 VNVV fighters were up in the air soon after the alarm signalling incoming enemy went off at 14:20. While the 28 fighters belonging to 2/6. *Orlyak* engaged the 'Lightnings', the other *orlyatsi* pilots jumped on the bombers. Eventually, only *Kandidat ofitser* Veselin S. Terziev of the 2/6. *Orlyak*⁶⁹ was credited with a four-engine bomber, bagged at Kule Mahala – the sole confirmed victory that day (3 points)⁷⁰. Indeed, a B-17G (S/N 42-31182) crashed near Plovdiv, the entire crew of ten becoming prisoners of war. Additionally, a 'Lightning' was 'efficiently' attacked by the same Terziev and his wingman, *Podof.* Georgi I. Kolev, which reportedly began to smoke; the Bulgarian pilots received no points for this event. Terziev could not enjoy his sole air victory for too long, however, as he was killed in unknown circumstances in a flying accident on 20 May. Two more claims were submitted by 3/6. *Orlyak* pilots against 'Lightnings', both being unconfirmed, however (0 points). One of the 3/6. *Orlyak's* *Strelas* was hit in combat, the pilot had to belly land it. Another damaged one could return home.

On the 15th of the month, three P-38Js (Nos. 42-104102, 42-104151 and 42-67965) returning from Rumania crashed near the harbour of Ruse – the fifth largest town of Bulgaria – without the interference of Bulgarian fighters, however. One pilot (2nd Lt. John Ingram) was killed and two others (2nd Lt. Joseph Garrity and 1st Lt. Robert Zimmerman) ended up prisoners of the Bulgarians. A fourth 'Lightning' pilot of the same fighter group, the 14th, Col. Oliver E. Ford Jr. of Group HQ is listed as missing in action in the same area, along with his mount, No. 42-104138. There are four air victories over P-38s awarded to pilots of Staff, 4. and 6./JG 51 (based at Târgșorul-Nou, Rumania), at unspecified location, which most probably account for the aforementioned USAAF losses. The double US bombing raid against Nish happened without the interference of Bulgarian fighters.

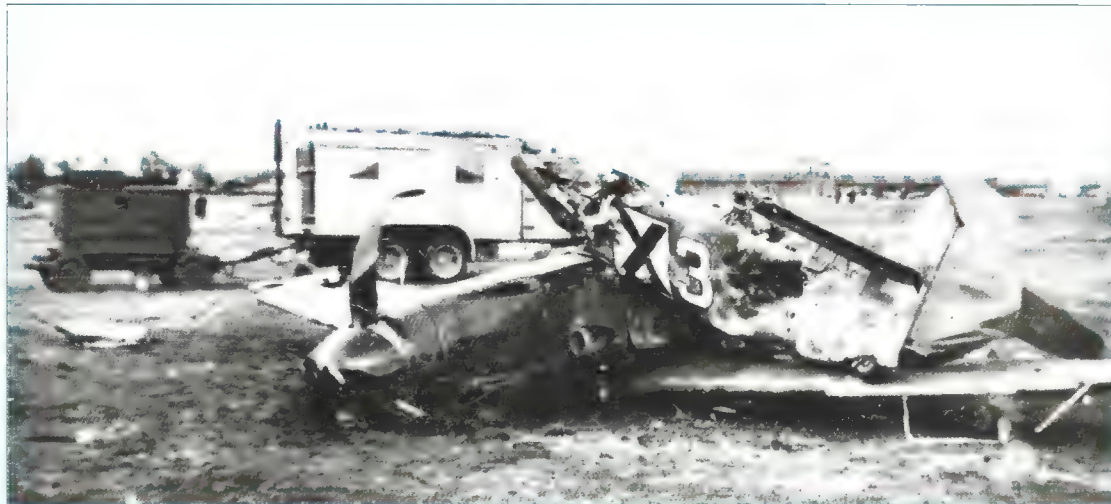
Between the occasional live interception missions, training flights continued unabated, with occasional losses. One victim of these drills was *Feldfebel* Ivan Minchev Somlev of 3/6. *Orlyak*, formerly flying D.520s within 4/6. *Orlyak*. On 16 April, he took off from Bozhurishte in bad weather and crashed at Novo Selo, near Ferdinand (today called Montana), due to low visibility and disorientation⁷¹. While flying in thick clouds, he decided to descend to regain visibility, but crashed into a mountain peak.

The 17th of April turned out to be the darkest day for Bulgarian fighter pilots. That fateful day saw the première of the famed and feared P-51 appearing in Bulgarian skies. The 'Mustangs' were accompanied by the equally feared 'Thunderbolts'. The 'Lightnings', well known to Bulgarian airmen, did not represent a surprise any more. In total, 46 P-51s of the 31st FG, 24 P-47s of the 325th FG and 44 P-38s of the 14th FG escorted 250 B-24s of the 47th and 304th BW in a bombing raid against the marshalling yard of Sofia. What the Bulgarians could oppose them with were a total of only 37 fighters (of which 30

69 It's uncertain if Terziev flew on Bf 109G, or on D.520; most probably on the former aircraft type.

70 The official list of Bulgarian air victories lists Terziev's victory for 9 April, which must be a typo.

71 Somlev is often mentioned as 'killed in action' on 17 April 1944, during the defence of Sofia, which is in error.



This old Bf 109G-2 broke in two following a hard landing on the runway. Unfortunately, details are lacking, as official Bulgarian documents practically never record the aircraft's fuselage number, only the so-called Nomenklaturen Nomer (NN), applied in a triangle on the fin, which is illegible. The repair truck arrived at the scene; however, there was not much left to salvage. Notice the fuselage number 'White 3' outlined in a dark shade colour other than black, thus either red, or green.

were Bf 109Gs). The Vrazhdebna-based 2/6. *Orlyak* contributed with 16 Bf 109G-2s (in addition to two D.520s), which took off at noon, while 14 G-6s and G-2s took off from the base of 3/6. *Orlyak*, Bozhurishte. Considering the numerical and often technical superiority of the Americans, every air engagement was a rendezvous with death for the vastly outnumbered and outgunned Bulgarian pilots.

Not only were the Bulgarian fighters outnumbered 3:1, they were alerted late, and could not climb to the desired altitude by the time the Americans arrived. The alarm sounded less than half an hour before the first US strike, which meant that the Bulgarians could be surprised by the enemy while still climbing. Moreover, the silhouette of the 'Mustang' was unknown to Bulgarian pilots, who thought that their German comrades came to help with similar looking Messerschmitt '109s. However, what the unsuspecting Bulgarians got instead of the much-needed help was a hail of bullets coming from above. In a matter of minutes, ten aircraft (eight Bf 109Gs and two D.520s) and six pilots were lost (four flying Bf 109s and two D.520s). Particularly badly hit was the 2/6. *Orlyak*, which lost eight aircraft, two others being damaged. Four men of this unfortunate fighter group were killed in the brief, but ferocious mêlée with the Americans. Four others took to their parachutes and two more belly landed with their stricken machines, escaping alive. When the last survivors landed, they learned with stupor that over half of their comrades would not return to the base on their wings. The lucky ones eventually returned on their feet (some after time spent in hospital), while the unlucky ones ended up six feet underground.

As tallied above, four *Strela* pilots were 'killed in action'; this set a negative record. They included two experienced 2/6. *Orlyak* pilots: the 31-year-old *Kapitan* Hristo Georgiev Arnaudov (elevated in rank just two days prior to his demise), was shot down over Verdikal, near Bankya, and died⁷². Another *Kapitan*, Dimităr Stefanov Popov (also elevated in rank just the day prior to his premature death), was killed as well. The two other victims were members of 3/6. *Orlyak*: *Kapitan* Lyuben Zahariev Kondakov (elevated in rank just the day prior to his death), as well as *Podponuchik* Ivan Todorov Stefanov, both 'killed in action'. The four Bf 109G pilots who bailed out, all of 2/6. *Orlyak*, were: *Kapitan* Nikolay Stoyanov Boshnakov, who landed at Kyustendil; *Ponuchik* Nedélcho Dimitrov Bonchev⁷³, who landed at Kranets, near Radomir, after ramming a B-24 over Drugan (the second such recorded occurrence of a Bulgarian fighter pilot)⁷⁴, as well as *Ponuchik* Nayden Petrov Stoyanov, who landed at Bankya, near Sofia, and *Podponuchik* Viktor Dimitrov Atanasov. In addition, *Podponuchik* Krum Hristov Atanasov and *Podponuchik* Vladimir Anghelov Aleksandrov (called 'Zhuk'), both of 2/6. *Orlyak*, belly landed their damaged Bf 109G-6s. There is no detailed information available on the number of damaged Bf 109Gs of 3/6. *Orlyak*, if any.

Although the Bulgarians were badly beaten that day and had to retreat bloody nosed, they did not leave the mêlée without hitting back as much as they could after coming to their senses from the bad surprise the 'Mustangs' gave them. The first unit to engage the enemy, 672. *Yato*, jumped upon the 'Liberators'. It was the C/O of this fighter squadron, *Ponuchik* Nikolay Yordanov⁷⁵, who opened the score by hitting two engines of a B-24 flying west of Bosilegrad, which then started to smoke and left

72 Arnaudov was born on 1 July 1916, in Sevlievo. Specialized in Germany on flying the Bf 109. He was awarded posthumously with the 'Order of Bravery', 4th Grade, 2nd Class.

73 A crash report dated 15.03.1945 details the destruction of Bonchev's mount on 17.04.1944, identifying it as 'M. 109 G-6', No. 77, of 652. *Yato*, which crashed at 11:10. Although the serial numbers of the two MG 131 machine guns and the single MG 151 cannon are given, the construction number of the airframe is unfortunately missing from the report.

74 There is no bomber loss recorded in the USAAF annals, so Bonchev's target was probably only damaged.

75 Nikolay Georgiev Yordanov was born on 11.08.1915 at Vratsa. Called 'Kitcho' by his colleagues and friends, he was very popular, being remembered as a handsome, outgoing man, very friendly and jolly. He survived many aerial combats, scored four air victory points (one downed 'Lightning', one damaged 'Flying Fortress' and one more 'Mitchell'). He found his death



Podofitser Dimităr R. Somov of 3/6. Orlyak enjoys a moment of relaxation in front of one of the fighter group's Bf 109G-6s on a hot summer day in 1944. The 'Gustav' is fitted with the enhanced visibility canopy, known as Erla-Haube. Somov ended the war with only one victory point, earned by 'efficiently' targeting a 'Liberator', performed over Kragujevac (Serbia), on 22 July 1944.

for damaging a couple of 'Fortresses'. Reportedly, both bombers 'started to smoke heavily and left their formation'. The personal logbook of a 'Liberator' crewmember of the 450th BG, 722nd BS, Staff Sergeant Walter J. Kostro, mentions an encounter with an enemy fighter: "April 17, 1944. 48th Mission. The target was Sofia, Bulgaria. The target was the city. There was plenty of flak. We had P-51 and P-47 escort. One [enemy] fighter attacked our squadron firing 20 mm [cannon shells]. It didn't do no damage. The left waist gunner fired at it, it got away. 5 1/2 hr. flight."

The official logbook of the 450th BG gives the following account of the enemy fighters' activity: "The only fighters encountered today were 8/10 ME-109's and FW-190's, but the attacks were not aggressive on the whole and only one of our ships was hit by a 20 mm shell, causing an injury to Sgt. Harold A. White, who suffered wounds in the right leg from shrapnel. (...) The ships returned at 1415 hours and the men gathered on the ground in the doughnut and coffee line."

When that sombre Easter Day died down, the Bulgarian fighter pilots reported a number of 'kills' – all bombers, no fighters – as follows: one bomber destroyed (3 points) and five more severely damaged (2 points each). In addition, one enemy fighter, identified as a 'Thunderbolt' (actually, a 'Mustang'), was 'efficiently attacked' by Ppor. Nayden P. Stoyanov (0 point). Reportedly, a 'Thunderbolt' (most probably the same 'Mustang' already damaged by Ppor. Stoyanov) was also hit by Podofitser Nayden H. Gogov of 2/6. Orlyak at 4,000 m, between Dragoman and Tsaribrod, where it "most likely" crashed. However, this claim was not officially credited, even though a 'Mustang' of 309th FS, 31st FG, did actually crash in Bulgarian territory (a newcomer P-51B, No. 42-106479, coded WZ-H, flown by 2nd Lt. Raymond L. Dameron, is confirmed as lost around Radomir). This was the only aircraft lost in the final American strategic daylight bombing mission against the wartime territory of the Tsardom of Bulgaria. To the fighter pilots' claims, an additional enemy aircraft has to be added as destroyed and further nine as damaged by the anti-aircraft guns. As detailed above, the Bulgarian Bf 109G pilots paid dearly for their meagre success: four of their ranks perished, along with eight aircraft, plus two more damaged.

American fighter pilots also reported a remarkable number of victories. The P-51-equipped 31st FG claimed a total of three 'Me-109s' downed, including a double scored by the Group Commander, Col. Charles Milton McCorkle, and four others damaged, all over Sofia between 12:15–13:00. The 317th FS of the 325th FG, flying on P-47s, filed claims for four 'Me-109s' and a further one probably downed over Sofia and west of it. The overall total of seven downed and four damaged fighters was actually

the formation losing height. He received 2 points for damaging a 'Fortress'⁷⁶. Closely following him was *Feldfebel shkolnik* Dako P. Dakov, who was also credited with 2 points for damaging (perhaps the same) four-engine bomber⁷⁷.

In the meantime, what was left of 2/6. Orlyak recovered as well. C/O Kapitán Nikolay Boshnakov hit a 'Fortress' over Zemen, which started to burn and left the 'box' (it was worth 2 points). However, while following his target he neglected to watch his back and was bounced by enemy fighters over Kyustendil. The incoming shells crippled the aircraft and shredded the cockpit, but the pilot managed to release the canopy of his '109 and bailed out, saving his life. However, in the haste of evacuating the doomed *Strela*, he did not disconnect the radio cable, so he was nearly strangled by it upon bailing out. The unconscious Boshnakov survived the hard landing at Dobri Dol, but would not fly in combat any more. His eyes were red with blood and he had to wear dark sunglasses to protect his poor eyesight.

His squadron mate, *Poruchik* Nedélcho Bonchev, wanted to score a perfect hit and closed in to point-blank range before pulling the trigger. However, he misjudged the distance and ended up inadvertently ramming the enemy. The bomber reportedly exploded upon the collision and fell at Krapets, near Pernik. Bonchev's Messerschmitt also broke to pieces; the pilot found himself flying through the air strapped in his seat and nothing else around him, but some debris. He managed to get rid of the seat and open his chute just in time, at very low altitude, before he crashed to the ground. Somehow, he managed to stay alive, and lived another day to tell his extraordinary story to his colleagues who survived that black day. No US bomber was lost, though.

Two additional pilots of 2/6. Orlyak, the venerable *Poruchik* Asen Kovachev, as well as *Podporuchik* Vladimir Aleksandrov, received two victory points each,

not while flying, but while travelling on his motorcycle to Bozhurishte airfield on an autumn 1944 evening. Hit some long iron bars loaded onto an unlit Soviet army truck. *Kpt.* Yordanov died a couple of days later in hospital, on 2 October 1944.

76 As noted earlier, Bulgarian pilots had a tendency to identify all four-engine US bombers as 'Fortress'.

77 The official list of air victories gives the date as 17 January, but this is certainly a typo, as that day there was no enemy intrusion in Bulgarian airspace.

less than the real losses inflicted to the Bulgarians! Most probably, a couple more were downed or damaged by the bombers' on-board gunners, who claimed, as usual, a grossly exaggerated number of 'kills': fourteen destroyed and two more damaged. Thus, it can be concluded that in contrast to the Bulgarian fighter pilots, the Americans this time did not 'overclaim', but rather 'underclaim'.

This bloody April day turned out to be the last one when the USAAF directly targeted Sofia and, generally, Bulgaria⁷⁸. Priorities and diminishing resources constrained the USAAF commanders to shift focus onto Rumania and its ever-vital oilfields around Ploesti. From then on, American warplanes used Bulgarian airspace only as thoroughfare to Rumania and back. This switch in strategy did not mean the Bulgarians would not clash with the Americans any more. They tried, sometime half-heartedly, to catch the white-starred warplanes on their way to the target and, particularly, on their way back, when they were disorganised and many of them suffering of combat damage straggled, making them easier prey than when flying in tight combat box.

Following the heavy losses suffered on 17 April – a day remembered by Bulgarian fighter pilots as 'Black (Orthodox) Easter Monday' – the perished men and lost matériel were replaced by further Bf 109G-6s coming from Germany and more young pilots who had graduated from the VNVV's *Iztrebitelnata Shkola* (Fighter School) of Dolna Mitropoliya, operating under German tutelage. The 'green' pilots' training left much to be desired, however; particularly in view of the demanding, high-tech Bf 109G-6 they had to master. The inadequate training caused many accidents, mostly minor, which in turn depleted the serviceable aircraft stock to a minimum. Occasionally, deadly accidents occurred as well. One such catastrophe happened on 24 April, when *Podporuchik* Viktor Dimitrov Atanasov crashed to his death during a failed take-off from Bozhurishte airfield⁷⁹. Just a week earlier, he saved his life by bailing out and landed safely. This time, the pilot's luck left him. Another deadly accident claimed the life of *Kandidat ofitser* Veselin Stoev Terziev, who was reportedly in bad health when he crashed to his death on 20 May, probably after losing consciousness in mid-air. A crash report issued on 7.02.1945 details the destruction of Terziev's mount, identifying it as 'Me. 109 Gustav 6', 122/7057 of 2/6. *Orlyak*, which burned out near Vrazhdebna airfield, at 12:30. *Ppor.* Stefan Marinopolski was luckier, as he survived a bad take-off, when his aircraft, Green 8, caught fire on 5 May, at 13:15. The other dozen '109s of 2/6. *Orlyak* lifted off, and performed an uneventful patrol mission. Next day, it was his group mate, *Por.* Dimităr A. Dimitrov's turn to experience engine fire during take-off. He also escaped the subsequent crash, but the aircraft was written off.

Besides accidents, the first official write-offs of Bf 109G-6s started to show up in the annals of the VNVV⁸⁰. The first such entry in the write-off lists found by the Author is dated 20 April, when *Strela* NN 64/7057 was written off, along with the DB 605 engine, W.Nr. 702474. Another *Strela*, NN 105/7067, was written off on 5 May, as was the DB 605 engine, W.Nr. 702830. The next such write-off is dated 20 May, and involves NN 122/7057 (the mount of *Kand. of.* Terziev).

Podporuchik Hristo Kostakev stands in front of his mount, 'Red 3' (as given by the original photo's description), on a hot day of 1944. Kostakev had the reputation of destroying two 'Liberators' in one sortie, on 30 March 1944. This outstanding feat earned him six victory points, the most awarded to a single pilot on a combat day. Notice the main undercarriage covers were removed, due to operating off muddy runway. The cowling underside was painted yellow up to the exhaust stacks.



Number of aircraft and aircrew available to 3/6. *Orlyak* in early and mid-April 1944 (total/ combat ready)*:

| Date | 1.04 | 6.04 | 7.04 | 8.04 | 9.04 | 14.04 | 15.04 | 17.04 | 18.04 | 19.04 |
|----------|-------|------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Aircraft | 37/20 | 19 | 14 | 16 | 18 | 17 | 19 | 18 | 12 | 11 |
| Aircrew | 38/21 | 25 | 35/15 | 35/19 | 19 | 18 | 21 | 20 | 18 | 18 |

*only those dates are listed when there was a change in the numbers

Back to the air defence of Bulgaria, the first occasion for the Bulgarian defenders to tangle with the American 'trespassers', who were on their way to Rumania or back, occurred on 5 May. However, only a D.520-equipped group reported victory claims that day, without any corresponding USAAF loss,

78 There will be one more daylight bombing raid against a Bulgarian target, Karlovo fighter base, on 28 June, but that was a tactical, rather than a strategic, raid.

79 A list of fallen airmen lists the cause and date of Atanasov's death as "dogfight" on 17 April 1944.

80 The dates of the official write-offs usually do not necessarily correlate with the actual date of loss. Sometime – rarely – the write-off coincides with the date of loss, in other cases the difference is only one day; however, often it could be months, or even over a year. Unfortunately for the aviation historians, no further details are given in these official write-off records, except for the fact that a particular aircraft was written off at a given date.

Ppor. Hristo Kostakev, hero of the day, is surrounded by jubilant crowd in Breznik, on 30 March 1944. It was really his big day. First, he scored by luck a double victory that earned him six points – an unparalleled feat among Bulgarian fighter pilots – then he escaped unscathed from a horrendous crash.



however. Next day, an American bomber (B-24H, S/N 42-52282) was reportedly lost over north-western Bulgaria, at Kula; this time, however, no air victory claim was filed by any Bulgarian fighter pilot. Actually, *Ofw.* Fritz Liebelt of 6./JG 51 did claim a B-24, downed SW of Vidin, which is in the same area.

That very morning, a *Luftwaffe Jagdstaffel* arrived in Bulgaria to reinforce the local defenders. It was a recently raised squadron, namely 4./JG 301, whose Bf 109G-6s landed at Vrazhdebna air base on the 5th. They were followed by the 5th *Staffel* a couple of days later.⁸¹ However, their stay in Bulgaria would not be long, only about one month, as they were ordered to move further, to the beleaguered Rumania. The gap they left was only brief, however, as the rest of the IInd *Gruppe* of JG 301 would arrive at Bozhurishte on the 14th, led by *Hptm.* Wilhelm Fulda. They moved to Vrazhdebna on the 26th of the month. The understrength II./JG 301⁸² was subordinated to *Jagdfliegerführer* (JaFü) Balkan, along with the Bulgarian fighter units. The incomplete, squadron-strong *Gruppe* would stay in Bulgaria until late August 1944, when it retreated to Seyring, near Vienna, in Austria.

On the 7th of May, six machines of 3/6. *Orlyak* were scrambled to catch the enemy; however, at the end, there was no air combat. They landed at Karlovo with the job unfinished; later that day they returned to Bozhurishte, less one of them, which remained in Karlovo because of damage suffered during landing.

The next date when Bulgarian fighter pilots claimed air victories was 18 May. That day, despite heavy weather, US bombers and fighters were deployed *en masse* against targets in Rumania and occupied Yugoslavia. A four-aircraft Messerschmitt *krilo* took off against the American warplanes cruising through Bulgarian airspace. The small interception fighter party, made of two *dvoykas*, was led by the venerable *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov, while the equally experienced *Podporuchik* Ivan Bonev was in charge of the second pair. After a hot pursuit of straggling enemy warplanes, the latter airman, together with his wingman, *Feldfebel shkolnik* Dako Dakov, downed a 'four-engine bomber', which went down near Prishtina, Kosovo (of the three points awarded for the destruction of the bomber, Bonev was credited with two points, Dakov with one point). Another bomber, which crashed at Prokuplye (Serbia), was claimed by *Podporuchik* Evgheni Tonchev, who was eventually credited as the sole victor, earning 3 points (despite *Por.* Stoyanov also shooting at). In fact, eight US bombers (six B-24s and two B-17)⁸³ were lost over Bulgaria and the vicinity on that day. Additionally, a P-38J was also lost, reportedly to flak fire, over 'Divaslat, Bulgaria' (most probably Diva Slatina).⁸⁴ The pilot, 2nd Lt. Paul J. Wingert of 49th FS,

81 On 4 May, Fw. Früh of II./JG 301 took off from Ilandzha airfield (Banat region) heading towards Bulgaria, where he never arrived.

82 At the end of June, the entire aircraft park of II./JG 301 (theoretically at least 40-aircraft strong) would consist of only ten Bf 109G-6s!

83 For details, check the comprehensive table of USAAF losses in Annex.

84 Rumanian Bf 109E-7 pilot, *Locotenent aviator* Horia Pop of *Escadrila 52 vânătoare*, also claimed a P-38 'Lightning' over northern Bulgaria.



14th FG, bailed out at about 3,000 m altitude and landed in 'friendly' lines. However, it is unclear if he landed alive or dead, as he is listed as KIA. From the Bulgarian side, two fighters were slightly damaged. From the German side, *Ltn.* Siegfried Pflitsch of Stab II./JG 51 claimed a 'Liberator' over Leskovats, *Fw.* Hans-Günther Kass (Koch?) of 6./JG 51 another one near Prilep. *Oblt.* Otto Schulz, *Staffelkapitän* of the same squadron, damaged another 'viermot'; however, he was wounded by return fire and had to abandon the fight and land quickly at Medoshevats air base. A Bf 109G of II./JG 51 was lost, another one was damaged in combat, alongside Schulz's mount.

A German document notes that in addition to the 48 Bf 109G-6s already delivered by 24 May, 26 further G-6s will be offered as replacement for the 15 total losses in the last period, plus the heavily damaged ones. Apparently, attrition was high, but replacements were slow to arrive. Another German document sums up the total Bf 109G deliveries by 2 July, as follows: 36 Bf 109G-2 in 1943, 23 Bf 109G-2s and 82 Bf 109G-6s in 1944, thus a total of 141 aircraft⁸⁵. Of these, 39 aircraft were already written off.

Between airspace protection missions, the *Strelas* were occasionally tasked by the Army HQ with attacking ground targets, mostly positions or units of Communist partisans. One such ground attack mission was performed on 20 May. That day, fighter pilots of 3/6. *Orlyak* were ordered to give air support to the 1st Battalion of the 20th 'Dragomanski' Infantry Regiment, encircled by partisans in the Cherni Vrah area, near Piroto. Accordingly, three groups of four Bf 109Gs took off, one after the other, to drop ammunition packed in drop tanks to the encircled unit. After releasing their payload, the fighters strafed the nearby bushes they thought the partisans would hide in. However, in reality, this was done mostly to boost the morale of the encircled soldiers, as enemy targets were very hard to spot on the rough terrain, filled with lush vegetation.

The end of May saw the return to Bulgaria of a *Luftwaffe* fighter *Gruppe*, namely the incomplete II./JG 51⁸⁶, which initially found quarters on Bozhurishte main air base, on the 29th. A few days later, the *Stab* moved to Radomir/Värba, located south-west of Sofia. At that time, the whole *Gruppe* mustered 56 Bf 109G-6s; however, only about 2/3rd were actually stationed in Bulgaria. The German airmen, led by *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Karl Rammelt (former head of *Jagdabschnittsführer Bulgarien*), would stay in Bulgaria until mid-July 1944, changing base a couple of times in this period (Vrazhdebna, Pernik). On 16 July, the bulk of the *Gruppe* left Bulgaria, leaving only the 4th *Staffel* behind. This *Luftwaffe* squadron – which would be renamed the 7th on 15 August – was stationed in Bulgaria about a week more, until the 24th of the month, when it also moved out of the Balkan country, to Franzfeld. Additionally, a *Luftwaffe* night fighter squadron (4./NJG 200, soon renamed 6./NJG 100) also moved to Bulgaria, to Krumovo, where it would stay until the Bulgarian about-face of early September 1944.

A comprehensive VNVV Order of Battle, dated 31 May 1944, lists the following fighter groups equipped with the Bf 109G:

- 2/6. *Iztreb. Orlyak*, with 21 serviceable and 33 unserviceable Bf 109 *Strela*, totalling 54 aircraft,
- 3/6. *Iztreb. Orlyak*, with 18 serviceable and 36 unserviceable Bf 109 *Strela*, totalling 54 aircraft.

The 10th of June 1944 is considered the blackest day in the history of the American fighter forces operating over Europe in WW II. That day, 93 P-38J 'Lightnings' (48 of the 82nd FG, carrying a 1,000-pound bomb and a 310-gallon ferry drop tank each, and 45 of the 1st FG, which would provide fighter top cover) were sent to dive bomb the Rumanian oilfields around heavily fortified Ploesti. Air

This fine line-up of Bf 109G-6s of IV./JG 27 is said to be photographed in Bulgaria, on an airfield adjacent to Sofia. However, several details cast doubt on this. First, the rear fuselage ring and wingtips appear to be white, not yellow, as they should be. The lower engine cowlings appear to be yellow, though. Finally, the mountain in the background does not resemble the geography in the Sofia area. Despite the missing precise date and location, this photo has a place in here, as IV./JG 27 did take part in the air battle over Bulgaria during the winter of 1943/1944. Notice the first and third aircraft have a tropical filter attached to the air intake scoop. The second aircraft is fitted with underwing cannon gondolas. The fourth aircraft has its spinner still in black green, without white spiral. Finally, the two yellow horizontal bars on the rear fuselage – representing the IVth Gruppe – is a marking rare depicted. Note the round Kapitänswimpel (Captain's Pennant) fitted to the antenna mast of the nearby aircraft, 'Yellow 1'.

⁸⁵ In the master delivery list, compiled by the Author, there are 142 aircraft listed by that date, which is a pretty good match.

⁸⁶ One *Staffel*, 5./JG51, was primarily based at Kalamaki, in Greece, while other elements of the IInd *Gruppe* returned to Nish air base.



Personnel of the 1st FG, 94th FS, gather for a squadron photo, on their air base in Italy. 'Lightnings' of the 1st FG were prominent 'actors' of the air war over Bulgaria in 1944.

aborts removed from the formation a total of 21 P-38s, leaving 72 aircraft to penetrate enemy airspace, two hours earlier than usual. The daring fighter-bomber mission turned out to be a disaster for the Americans, as 23 P-38s (an astonishing 32%!) perished at the hands of the Rumanian and German fighter pilots and, to a lesser extent, flak fire (one more crashed upon return to Italy). Of all the perished 'Lightnings', a single one was lost over Bulgaria⁸⁷, namely the one piloted by 1st Lt. Carl C. Hoenshell (P-38J, S/N 43-28704). Out of ammunition, Hoenshell – who reportedly engaged single-handedly the German '109s in order to save his comrades also left without ammunition, and received post-mortem the Distinguished Service Cross for his unselfish act – was most probably downed by a *Luftwaffe* fighter pilot of 6./JG 51, *Ltn.* Johann (Hans) Taubenberger, north of Sofia. The Bulgarians did not file for a single claim that day, as the 34 Bf 109Gs patrolling Sofia airspace totally missed the Americans.

On 11 June, the 16 combat-ready Bulgarian Bf 109Gs defending Sofia were scrambled from Bozhurishte air base against a large formation of US bombers, protected by a strong fighter escort, which was believed would attack the Capital (they actually headed towards the Black Sea port of Constanța, Rumania). The American raiders comprised 146 B-24s of the 47th BW, escorted, in stages, by 46 P-51s of the 52nd FG and 36 P-38s of the 82nd FG.

Separately from the squadron-strong Bf 109Gs, which scrambled first from Bozhurishte air base, four more Bf 109Gs of 3/6. *Orlyak*, complemented by a Bf 109G flown by a flying instructor, took off from Dolna Mitropoliya airfield, home of the VNVV's fighter school. A small number⁸⁸ of German '109s of 5./JG 301 also lifted off from Vrazhdebna to intercept the intruders.

A *Strela krilo* of 3/6. *Orlyak* that took off first to intercept the enemy warplanes in the northern district did not find them, and had to land for refuelling. After quickly topping up their fuel tanks, they took off again and started to gain altitude, where the others were still looking for the enemy. In the meantime, their comrades who stayed up in the air, flying at around 7,500 m, spotted below the US bombers and their fighter cover, heading north-east. Without much pondering, the Bulgarians jumped directly on the bombers, cutting through the fighter escort by taking advantage of their high diving speed. They zoomed in, opened fire, then swung away from the targets in a quick pass-by. *Podporuchik* Todor Rozev of the 672. *Yato* was one of the victors of the day, being awarded with three points for shooting down a lone 'Liberator' at Komarevo (others mention Kosharevo). Another victor was Rozev's squadron mate, *Podporuchik* Marin Tsvētkov, who also downed a lone flying 'Liberator', at Gorna Kremena, near Vratsa. The victims of the Bulgarian *Strela* pilots were two of the total of seven B-24s which crashed that eventful day (although not all due to interference of Bulgarians). For details, see annex with lost USAAF warplanes (page 255).

After the high-speed firing pass, the Bulgarians could not engage in dogfights with the American fighter escort, as usual, because they had to quickly land to refuel. Instead, it was the Americans who

87 2nd Lt. William Jefferson of the 82nd FG is sometime listed as disappeared over Bulgaria, based on the ambiguous description in MACR 5761. In fact, his P-38J (S/N 43-28818) was shot down in air combat over Rumania and crashed near Bucharest (Jefferson ended up POW first in Rumania, then in Germany).

88 In June 1944, the entire II./JG 301, based in Bulgaria and Rumania, had only 20 Bf 109G-6s available, half of the theoretical number. *Luftwaffe* Orders of Battle, dated 14.06. and 18.07., list only *Stab* II. *Gruppe* and 5./JG 301 on Vrazhdebna.



This pair of photos came from the same source. However, it's uncertain if the same 'Strela' is depicted. These so far unpublished photos, taken at Bozhurishte airfield in May 1944, are a welcome addition to the limited number of quality photos depicting Bf 109G in Bulgarian markings. 'Black 1' was repeatedly flown by Ppor. Stefan Marinopolski (652. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak) in March 1944.





Podporuchik Petăr K. Petrov of 2/6. Orlyak is pictured in front of his late production Bf 109G-6, sometime in late 1944. He ended the war with eight victory points, earned by destroying two US bombers and seriously damaging another one.

went after them. One of the Bf 109Gs, flown by *Podofitser* Toshko Hristov, was attacked during landing by a couple of P-51s. The damaged *Gustav* belly landed near the airfield and the lucky pilot escaped unhurt from the harrowing close encounter with the usually deadly 'Mustangs'.

The only total loss from the Bulgarian side was one of their top scoring fighter pilots, *Podporuchik* Ivan Bonev of 682. *Yato* (3+1 air victories, totalling 8 points), found dead on a field near the village of Ovchepoltsi. Reportedly, shortly after downing a 'Mustang', one of the victim's squadron mates finished off the victorious Bf 109G. Being shot at from behind, at close range, the pilot had to bail out of his crippled Messerschmitt. His ordeal was not over after escaping from the doomed '109, however. Top scoring expert pilot Bonev was killed while hanging defenceless on his chute by a P-51, whose pilot had just lost one of his own. Bonev's body was found with the parachute fully deployed, but half of his head was missing, ripped apart by large calibre bullets. This regrettable incident was not an uncommon occurrence of questionable behaviour displayed by a number of American fighter pilots⁸⁹. The closest location to Ovchepoltsi of an air victory achieved by a US fighter pilot is the one logged by 2nd Lt. Calvin Allen jr. of the 52nd FG, 5th FS. He reportedly downed a 'ME109' 40 miles (64 km) east of Sofia, at 8:45. *Ppor.* Bonev's air victory has a matching loss on the American side. Indeed, 2nd Lt. Joseph F. Riley of the 52nd FG, 2nd FS, flying a P-51B (43-7024), was reported as shot down in air combat over Bulgaria (the Germans did not claim any P-51 that day). The smouldering wreck of the 'Mustang' was found near Botevgrad, along with the charred body of the pilot.

At least four of the 'Mustang' pilots' victory claims were at the expense of the *Luftwaffe* 5./JG 301. Two German pilots, *Feldwebel* Günther Iffert and *Unteroffizier* Heinz Gerling, were killed in air combat, while two others, *Feldwebel* Paul Becker and *Unteroffizier* Hermann Ehrchen, were wounded⁹⁰. Both survivors bailed out of their stricken Messerschmitts. The latter two losses closely match the victory claims filed by 2nd Lt. James Empey of the 52nd FG, 5th FS in the vicinity of the Bulgarian capital. He described his first victory, logged at 8:45 NE of Sofia, as follows: "I located a lone ME109 and got on his tail. He made a straight dive at the ground. I followed, giving him short bursts at about 250 yards (228 m). I saw the pilot bail out and the E/A (enemy aircraft) crash into the ground." 2nd Lt. Empey's next 'kill' occurred about five minutes later. He reported the event like this: "About eight P-51s were at 15,000 feet (4,570 m) forming to return home when a pilot ahead of me called out E/A below at 3 o'clock. We started down to attack 3 ME109s stacked to the right. Another P-51 took the middle one and I took the one on the right. I fired several bursts, observing hits on the wings and fuselage. The canopy came off and the pilot bailed out." The location of his second victory is given as west of Sofia. Besides combatting the enemy in the air, the 52nd FG 'Mustangs' also targeted Leskovats airfield, where four 'Me109's were observed as taking off, and strafed Plovdiv airfield as well. The 5th FS claimed two aircraft destroyed on the ground, by Lts. Robert Carnie and Calvin Allen. Additionally, Capt. Robert C. Curtis of the 2nd FS was credited with a Me-109 destroyed at an airfield identified as Leskovats (coordinates: 43-00 N, 21-58 E), at 9:30. This might have been a wrong identification, and the victim was actually the aircraft of *Podof.* Hristov.

The 'Mustang' pilots did not get away lightly, though. Besides the loss of 2nd Lt. Riley, the P-51 of 1st Lt. James Hoffman of the 2nd FS was also badly shot up in the mêlée, but the skilled pilot managed to nurse it back to Madna air base, in Italy. More combat damage may have occurred as well; however, there is no information available on other damaged aircraft that managed to return.

The American fighter pilots who clashed with their Bulgarian and German counterparts reported that they were experienced and aggressive, but poor shots: "There was no disposition on the part of the enemy to avoid combat. In view of the evident ability of the enemy pilots there was some surprise expressed at the evidence of poor marksmanship on their part."

Two P-38Js of the 82nd FG, 95th FS, were also lost over Bulgaria to enemy fighters that day, while returning from Rumania. Both locations given by the MACRs are 20 miles (32 km) west of Sofia (Bulgarian sources give the crash site as near Radomir), which means they crashed in quick succession. The Bulgarians did not claim any 'Lightning' that day; therefore, the Germans must have been the victors. Indeed, two victory claims against P-38s were filed by *Luftwaffe* pilots *Ltn.* Günther Stedtfeld (of

89 This unethical (to say the least) behaviour was not limited to Bulgarian airspace. Statistics of the Hungarian pilots killed by US fighters while descending on their chute show that five Magyar pilots were killed and two wounded so severely they could not return to flying. This 'kill ratio' represents about 37% of all pilots who bailed out during combat with US fighters!

90 Bf 109 G-6, W.Nr. 162309, 4 km W of Samokow (*Uffz.* Gerling); Bf 109 G-6, W.Nr. 162644, NW of Belovgrad (*Uffz.* Ehrchen); Bf 109 G-6, W.Nr. 410085, NW of Bodewgrad [actually Botevgrad] (*Fw.* Becker) and Bf 109 G-6, W.Nr. 411988, 7 km W of Bodewgrad (*Fw.* Iffert).



This Bf 109G-6, believed to be 'Black 5', somersaulted during force landing on improper terrain. As explained in the photo legend of one of the colour profiles, black should have not been an option for fuselage (or board) number in 1944. However, the logbook of Ppor. Mari-nopolski reinforces the usage of black numbers on Bf 109Gs in 1944. The bottom fuselage area underneath the boots of the soldier at right, crouching on the fuselage, is glossy black, most probably due to leaked motor oil.

4./JG 51) and *Ofw.* Hans Sieckenius (of 6./JG 51), scored at 1,000 m over 'Lupnitsa' (actually Dupnitsa), which is located 40 km south of Radomir. Besides the two P-38s, German pilots from II./JG 51, I./JG 53 and III./JG 77 also filed claims for a total of eleven B-24s and two B-17s shot down, with another two B-17s damaged, all over Bulgaria⁹¹. Additionally, *Adjutant aviator* Ioan Marinciu of the Rumanian *Grupul 7 vânătoare* (7th Fighter Group), flying on a Bf 109G, damaged a B-24 over Bulgaria, just south of River Danube, natural border between the two countries⁹². In total, seven 'Liberators' of the party of 246 bombers that attacked Giurgiu were lost during the raid. An additional B-24 of the 449th BG that attacked the Black Sea port of Constanța, located close to the Bulgarian borders, was also lost, while another one of the 98th BG landed in neutral Turkey, where the crew was interned.

The American crews reported that three waves of twenty to thirty fighters attacked the bombers of the 49th BW over the target (the Rumanian Danube port city of Giurgiu) for about half an hour, closing to within one hundred yards (91.4 m) of the bombers. A lone Axis fighter tried, unsuccessfully, to shoot down a straggling 455th BG 'Liberator', but was reportedly itself shot down. The bombers' on-board gunners claimed yet again a staggering number of enemy fighters shot down, no fewer than 27, along with a further nine probable. Gunners of the 97th BG, flying on B-17s, claimed a further two attackers.⁹³

The close-range attack on the American 'heavies' claimed a toll from the German side. *Leutnant* Carl-Ernst Platte of 6./JG 301⁹⁴ was killed by the on-board gunners; his Bf 109Ga-6, Yellow 4 (W.Nr. 760226), crashed 40 km SSW of the Danubian port city of Ruse, on Bulgarian soil.

The day after the 3:1 victory over USAAF warplanes scored by Bulgarian fighters, when the brunt of the losses was suffered by American day bombers, it was the turn of the British night bombers to return to Bulgaria. This time, about 50 RAF bombers targeted Karlovo (Marno Pole) main fighter base, home of several fighter units as well as fighter trainers. Over 100 aircraft were stationed at Karlovo at that time, including many Bf 109Es andGs. The unexpected air raid caused havoc. Over a dozen Bulgarian warplanes were destroyed and damaged, some twenty men killed and scores injured. The hangars were heavily damaged, and the nearby fuel depot went up in flames. The bombing raid was repeated on 28 June, this time by US day bombers. This daylight raid was significantly larger than the night time one. After the dust settled, many aircraft, including a few Bf 109Gs⁹⁵, were found in flames,

91 These claimers included *Ltn.* Herbert Franke of 2./JG 53, for a B-24 at Buschuk (his 5th victory), *Hptm.* Otto Schultz of 6./JG 51, for a B-24 at Bielovo, *Uffz.* Martin Hain of 8./JG 77, for a B-24 at Guvezde (his 2nd victory), *Ltn.* Günther Schmitz, *Kommandeur* of III./JG 77, for two B-24s in the Buschuk area (his 31st & 32nd victories) and *Uffz.* Heinz Wassermann of 7./JG 77, for a B-24 at Guvedze (his 2nd victory). Further 4+3 claims were filed by other III./JG 77 pilots, without location given.

92 Information taken from his logbook.

93 Occasionally, on-board gunners did manage to shoot down enemy fighters. One such case, in the discussed geographical area, was Bf 109G-6, W.Nr. 163274, flown by *Uffz.* Ludwig Stürmer of 4./JG 51, killed by return fire from a B-24 over Crnajka, Serbia, ca. 200 km NNW of Sofia, on 6.06.1944.

94 Other source mentions *Ltn.* Platte's unit as III./JG 77.

95 The number of serviceable Bf 109Gs available to 3/6. *Orlyak* decreased by two, from 10 to 8, from 28 to 29 June. On 1 July, it dropped by further two.



The three men gathered around the tail of 'White 8' are (from left to right): Boris V. Damev, unknown civilian and Petăr B. Kantardzhiev. Photo taken in the summer of 1944. It appears that the stencil used to paint the numeral on the fuselage was used upside down. Another photo of the same machine, with Damev at its fuselage, is featured on page 36.

destroyed and damaged. The airfield infrastructure was further demolished and rendered useless. Two pilots (*Poruchitsi* Georgi P. Kirovski and Nikola R. Kolev of 4/6. *Orlyak*) also died in the attack⁹⁶, several others were wounded. The only victory claim was reported by the crew of a light anti-aircraft battery guarding Sopot ordnance factory.

Back to the day air war, the next incursion of US warplanes in Bulgarian airspace happened on 23 June⁹⁷. That day, 18 Bulgarian Bf 109Gs of 3/6. *Orlyak* took off from Bozhurishte, complemented by 16 more of the Karlovo-based 2/6. *Orlyak*. Four German Bf 109Gs, led by Major Helmut Kühle, the head of the German flying instructors, also lifted off from Karlovo (Marno Pole) main air base. Other *Luftwaffe* fighters based at Värba (II./JG 51) scrambled as well. The Axis pilots' task was, as usual, to intercept the US bomber formations returning from Rumania and destroy as many bombers as possible. After a morning patrol, the airplanes landed for refuelling. They were up again in the air at 10:25. The on-duty *Gustavs* of 3/6. *Orlyak* were led by 'top gun' *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov. They were the first ones to spot and clash with the trespassers. The formation leader scored the first victory over a 'four-engine bomber' he attacked from behind, firing at the port side. The bomber subsequently exploded, and its remains fell west of Skopie, in Macedonia (Bulgarian territory during the war). Stoyanov was credited with 3 points. The freshly promoted *Poruchik* Boris Damev and his wingman, *Podporuchik* Evgheni Tonchev, fired at another 'Liberator', setting its two starboard engines ablaze. The crippled bomber reportedly left the 'box' and trailed behind, losing altitude. Soon after, another B-24 was also attacked 'efficiently'. Both Bulgarian pilots were credited with two points each. The final claim of the day was filed by *Podofitser* Toshko Hristov – who barely cheated death while being strafed during landing by a 'Mustang' just 12 days earlier – by knocking out an engine of a stray 'Liberator', possible the same one damaged earlier by his comrades. Hristov was eventually credited with a single point.

At one instance in the morning, at around 10:30, a single 'Flying Fortress' (B-17F, No. 42-5951 of 97th BG, 341st BS), visibly in trouble, cruised over Karlovo air base. It was its bad luck, as the Bulgarians were on high alert, along with their German comrades, waiting for the signal to take off. Upon sighting the lone enemy bomber, a green signal was promptly given. The four combat-ready '109s of 2/6. *Orlyak* took off at 10:40. They caught up with the target quickly, at 4,500 m. After a brief combat, they finished it off at about 25 km south of Karlovo. As all pilots of the *krilo* took shots in turns, based on the group's combat diary all were credited with a joint victory: *Por.* Kovachev, *Ppor.* Kirov (?), *Ppor.* Petrov (same as Kirov?) and *Ppor.* Barev. However, for some strange reason, this lone 'kill' was not officially endorsed.

96 Kolev "Kolosa" ("The Colossus") tried to escape with the car of *Kpt.* Asen Kovachev, a Ford Eifel. However, as he sat in it, a bomb splinter cut through him and he died.

97 The bombing mission against Bulgaria scheduled for 15 June was scrubbed immediately after briefing.



This late production 'Strela-G' is being serviced after a minor nose-in accident in the summer of 1944. The typical Bulgarian camouflage scheme is conspicuous. For unknown reason, the bottom fuselage area underneath the military marking is apparently painted black (it's not oil leak). Notice the absence of the typical light grey mottles from the engine cowlings.

Here is how the crew of the bomber at the receiving end, called 'Opissonya', fared. Already seriously damaged by flak fire and enemy fighters in the vicinity of Ploesti, Rumania, the bomber was further damaged by the Bulgarian '109s incoming bullets. Shrapnel from a 20-mm projectile wounded Staff Serg. Stanley Kmiec, forcing him to leave the ball turret. 2nd Lt. David Kingsley was working on Staff Serg. Michael Sullivan's wounds, when Kmiec entered the radio room for treatment to his own wounds. Pilot and co-pilot (2nd Lt. Edwin Anderson and 1st Lt. William Symonds) fought nearly non-existent controls, while 2nd Lt. Robert Newson manned the nose guns, T/Sgt John Meyer fought in the top turret, and Staff Serg. Harold James and Staff Serg. Martin Hettinga held their posts at the waist. 'Opissonya' shuddered repeatedly, smoke pouring from both wings as it steadily lost altitude – and still the fighters kept coming.

With all hope gone, the pilot, 2nd Lt. Anderson, lowered his landing gear – an international sign of surrender. The enemy fighters broke off and held their fire, but continued to shadow the floundering bomber. Then Anderson rang the "bail-out" bell as intercommunication was knocked out. Radioman Kaine, as well as gunners James and Hettinga, jumped out the waist door. Meyer left the top turret and jumped through the open bomb bay, while Newson went out through the bombardier's escape hatch. In the radio room, bombardier Kingsley grabbed Sullivan's parachute and prepared to strap it on the wounded tail gunner. However, he realised that not only were the straps damaged, but also the chute itself had been peppered with shrapnel. Without hesitation, Kingsley did something that would haunt Sullivan for the rest of his life: the Lieutenant took off his own parachute and strapped it on his comrade. "David then took me in his arms and struggled to the bomb bay, where he told me to keep my hand on the rip cord and said to pull it when I was clear of the ship," Sullivan later recalled. "Then he told me to bail out. I watched the ground go by for a few seconds and then I jumped. I looked at Dave, the look he had on his face was firm and solemn. He must have known what was coming because there was no fear in his eyes at all. That was the last time I saw... Dave standing in the bomb bay."

As quickly as Sullivan was out of the airplane Kingsley stood, just in time to see Symons heading for the bomb bay doors. "Where's Andy?" Kingsley shouted above the din. Symons pointed toward the cockpit and then dropped into the open sky below, nearly colliding with the pilot who nearly simultaneously bailed out through the bombardier's escape hatch. Bombardier Kingsley, having given up his parachute to a comrade, now remained alone in the rapidly falling bomber, with no means to escape. 'Mike' Sullivan remembered after the war: "I saw that Lieutenant Kingsley was sort of looping the ship. He pulled her out two more times... To me it looked as if he was trying to crash-land the plane and while all that was going on, the ME-109s were still making passes at it. He knew the basics of how to fly, but the way that plane was shot up and with just one out of four engines under full power and the direction controls all damaged, it would be nearly impossible for one man to handle those controls." The crippled bomber, out of control, eventually crashed on a hillside in the vicinity of Suhozem village.

Podporuchik Stefan Marinopolski⁹⁸, who had watched the air battle and subsequent crash from his tent on the ground at Marno Pole air base, arrived first at the scene. “There was a big explosion and a lot of smoke,” he remembered. “Through the fire and smoke I could see Kingsley’s body in the cockpit. There was nothing I could do for him. And lying nearby was a peasant family – father, mother and daughter, as well as four other family members. They were probably running away to escape the crashing plane, but it crashed into them and they all were killed.” It turned out that the Duralijski family was tending the vineyard that might well have appeared to the pilot from the air as a clearing. The family watched nine parachutes drop from the bomber before it passed over them, and then saw it turn back towards the north heading straight for the vineyard. All started to run but then stopped when they realized 9-month old Lalka had been left behind. They were rushing back to rescue the infant when the worst happened..

The bombardier, 2nd Lt. David R. Kingsley, who unselfishly sacrificed his own life to save his wounded comrade’s, was awarded posthumously with the United States Military’s highest award, the ‘Medal of Honor’, in 1945. The seven civilians, “collateral damage” of an ugly war, were buried unceremoniously.

The Bulgarians’ German comrades-in-arms were successful as well. *Ltn.* Günther Stedtfeld of 4./JG 51 was credited with shooting down as B-17 at Berkovitsa, while *Ofw.* Max Sulzgruber of 6./JG 301 bagged a P-51 somewhere ‘in the Balkans’. Indeed, a B-17G wreck (S/N 42-37813) was found at Berkovitsa, while a P-51C (S/N 42-103456) force landed at Pirot, its pilot becoming prisoner. In total, two B-24s, along with other two B-17s and the aforementioned P-51 crashed in Bulgarian territory, or close to its western borders, while two crewmembers of a third B-17 accidentally bailed out⁹⁹. These losses prove that the Axis fighter pilots’ claims this time were accurate.

Next day, as was usual, US bombers hit targets of opportunity across Bulgaria, on their way back from Rumania to their bases in Italy. The two Bf 109G-equipped fighter *orlyatsi* scrambled a total of 23 aircraft, fourteen by 3/6. from Bozhurishte and nine by 2/6. from Karlovo, where the latter *orlyak* was temporarily relocated. Eleven German fighters also took off to intercept the enemy. The ensuing air battle took place over the north and west regions of the Bulgarian Kingdom. The US bombers were intercepted by the ‘109s of 3/6. *Orlyak* over Koprivshtitsa and Panagyurishte. The last wave of the bomber formation was attacked. Two machines were hit repeatedly by several 3/6. *Orlyak* pilots. Both ‘Fortresses’¹⁰⁰ eventually crashed, at Samokov and between Negotino and Krivolak, respectively [other location

A Bf 109G-6 *dvoyka*, made by ‘Green 8’ (outlined) and ‘Green 4’ (not outlined), scrolls the Bulgarian sky covered by white cumulus clouds, sometime in 1944. They are fitted with auxiliary fuel tanks of 295 litre capacity, giving them additional flying time of about one hour, much needed in a prolonged air fight.

98 An interesting side story is that Marinopolski was the Bulgarian officer who first interviewed the ‘Opissonya’ survivors at Karlovo base. Sergeant Hettinga, the waist gunner, was so impressed with the treatment they received that he wrote his name and ‘Vicksburg, Tennessee’ on the foil wrapper of a cigarette pack and gave it to Marinopolski, with the recommendation *look me up after the war*. In the evening of a day in the early 1980s, Hettinga – then living in Fairbanks, Alaska – received a phone call from a person speaking English with a heavy accent. It was Marinopolski. It turned out that he had escaped the Communist camp and managed to track the US airman, as promised. Eventually, they met again in person, in 1983, almost four decades after the original event and the casual invitation.

99 For details of the USAAF losses, see comprehensive table of American warplanes that crashed in Bulgaria and vicinity.

100 As noted earlier, Bulgarian fighter pilots usually referred to any four-engine US bomber as ‘Fortress’.





Strelcha (Bogdan Peak in Sredna Mountain)]. The victories were awarded to two *troykas* (one point for each pilot), as follows: the first one to *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov and his two 682nd Squadron mates, *Podporuchik* Mihail Uzunov and *Kandidat podofitser* Kiril Stoyanov; while the other victory to *Poruchik* Boris Damev and his two 672nd Squadron mates, namely *Podporuchik* Marin Tsvētkov and *Feldfelbel* Yoto Kamenov. *Ppor.* Todor Rozev claims in his post-war memoirs that he was also part of that victorious *krilo*; however, he is not included in the official list of air victories, as part of the shared victory.

Another 'Fortress' was mortally hit by the machine guns and cannon of *Feldfelbel* Tsviatko Zagorski's Bf 109G. *Ppor.* Todor Rozev also fired at the same bomber. Later, he described the lone flying enemy aircraft as 'Marauder type' (no connection to the Martin B-26), a heavily armed version, with no bombload, but additional machine guns, sent as 'bait', to distract the enemy fighter pilots' attention and draw them away from the main bomber formation. Rozev claimed that even though 'Lightnings' appeared in the vicinity, trying to defend their protégé, he continued to attack the bomber, closing in at 100-150 m and kept firing at the area between the engine and the fuselage. The 'Fortress' started to burn fiercely – Rozev relates – an explosion followed and it started to fall to the ground. The 'Liberator' – which actually was the proper identification – eventually crashed on Bogdan Peak. However, the official victor, Zagorski, could savour the sweet taste of success only for a very short while, as he was jumped on by P-38s and finished off within minutes after his victory. The burning wreck was later on found near Aprilovo, just east of Sofia, along with the charred body of its unfortunate occupant. The 'Lightning' escort also tangled with other Bulgarian fighters. In the ensuing *mêlée*, the Bf 109G flown by *Podporuchik* Mihail Banov was damaged, forcing the pilot to save his life in a steep dive followed by force landing near Ihtiman. *Podporuchik* Hristo Kostakev's mount was hit as well, himself being wounded¹⁰¹. He also force landed in a field near Ihtiman, destroying the aircraft in the process. *Podporuchik* Hristo Krāstev was severely wounded as well in the *mêlée*. Finally, the *Strela* of *Ppor.* Mihail Uzunov was also hit, and the pilot had to belly land it.

The 'Lightnings' also closed on *Podporuchik* Todor Rozev as he reportedly finished off the unfortunate bomber. Here is how he recalls the start of the air battle in his memoirs: "They were behind me very close and jumped on me furiously. The first 'Lightning' was less than a hundred meters away! Its big red nose was so close that I spotted the pilot's head behind the armoured windshield." Despite his wild manoeuvres, his *Strela* was hit repeatedly and started to smoke. Rozev could not wait until he could belly

This late production Bf 109G-6, fitted with an increased visibility canopy, called Erla-Haube, and armoured glass backplate, is being readied for takeoff in the early autumn of 1944. Notice that the number is missing from the inner area of the lower wing, as probably the aircraft did not have a fuselage board number applied yet.

¹⁰¹ Kostakev passed away on 19 June 1994, at the age of 75. A plaque was erected in his memory on a house on Ruski Boulevard, in Stara Zagora, his city of birth.

Four Bulgarian and a German officer (centre) are sharing a smoke between combat missions, resting on the edge of Bozhurishte airfield. Unbeknown to them, their close co-operation would end in early September 1944.



land his stricken mount, as it started burning in mid-air. Therefore, he decided to bail out. However, the cockpit canopy was deformed by the salvo fired at close range, and could not be opened by the stranded pilot. By sheer fluke, when the fuel tank exploded, Rozev was thrown out of the cockpit unhurt, so he could land safely¹⁰² in the fields between the villages of Raduil and Dolna Banya, near Samokov. Here is how he describes his lucky escape in his memoirs: *“And there was a huge blow, a great hit! A powerful blast wave, like a hurricane, hurled into the cabin, broke it in two, and threw me out from the mangled cockpit that held me captive, to my death! As I was hurled out, the vertical stabilizer, like a massive, sharp knife, just swiped over my forehead and almost cut my head off! At last, I felt that I was falling and moving freely in the cool abyss, alone, unshackled from the sinister, fiery cockpit. Due to high speed, my body felt great air resistance and was increasingly lagging behind the wrecked airplane that was still diving at high speed. Shortly thereafter, it burst into the ground as a meteorite and exploded like a bomb!”*¹⁰³ I held the parachute’s release rope in my hand firmly, as if I’d keep my life! The distance to the ground quickly melted. When I reached the minimum height at which it was still possible to open the parachute, I pulled the rope vigorously. I waited with great tension the silk cupola to open, which it finally did, to my huge relief.”¹⁰⁴

Another Bulgarian ‘109 also had to belly land after being hit in combat. With this crash, the number of lost, or heavily damaged VNVV fighter aircraft rose to six. The aircraft flown by *Podporuchik* Evgheni Tonchev and *Feldfebel shkolnik* Tsvetan Gruev also received several hits, but they returned safely to the airfield. *Podporuchik* Tonchev’s aircraft had several holes in the propeller blades and one more in his wingtip, which was ripped apart.

Only one fighter from 2/6. *Orlyak*, flown by *Podporuchik* Petăr K. Petrov (in the group’s combat diary identified by his middle name, Kirov), came into contact with the enemy, shortly before 10 o’clock. He managed to catch a lone flying, already damaged, B-24 over Ihtiman and finish it off over Dospey, near Samokov. After the prolonged battle, he landed in Vrazhdebna on the last drops of fuel. Petrov’s ‘kill’ – which would be his last – was worth three victory points, secured him seventh place in the official list of successful Bulgarian fighter pilots.

¹⁰² It was not the only bail-out of *Podporuchik* Todor Rozev during his career. On 27 May 1949, he had to vacate his Yak-9M after a mid-air collision with another aircraft.

¹⁰³ At the very moment the book manuscript was closed, news emerged from Bulgarian media that the wrecks of a Bf 109 were found in the field near the village of Maritsa (near Samokov). The village of Raduil is located very near to Maritsa, with about 2 km being between the two villages. Most likely, the wrecks belong to Rozev’s stricken mount, and not what is currently believed to be the mount of *Podporuchik* Ivan Bonev, killed in action (while hanging on his chute) by a ‘Mustang’, on 11 June 1944. The body of Bonev was found in a field near Ovchepoltsi, which lies about 20 km north of Maritsa. At the end, it was found out that only the DB 605A-1 engine existed and was subsequently recovered. Its original construction number was then identified, namely 01102238. The very same day the number was revealed after digging the engine out of the watery hole, on 12 May 2018, the Author located a write-off document, dated 25 August 1944, which included this particular engine number, along with eight more, as well as eight *Strela* airframes. This document was then forwarded to the Bulgarian party doing the digging and recovery, as a modest contribution to the efforts of recovering and identifying this unique artefact. See page 44-45 for colour photos.

¹⁰⁴ Rozev lived long enough to write and publish his memories post-war, in 1957 (although heavily censored by Communist *apparatchiki*). See page 76 for book cover. A second, enlarged edition was published after regime change, in 1994.



The hand-written text on this original print by Poruchik Stoyan Stoyanov refers to his 15th air victory (point) achieved (i.e., on 26 August 1944, just days before Bulgaria would switch sides and engage in the anti-German campaign).

Poruchik Stoyan Stoyanov, Commanding Officer of 682. Yato, ended the so-called 'American Campaign' with the most victory points officially credited to a Bulgarian fighter pilot: fifteen. These points were earned by downing two 'Liberators' and two 'Lightnings', all officially confirmed. Additionally, he damaged four more US warplanes during the 15 air combats he performed in the 35 combat sorties he logged. Strictly speaking, the four enemy aircraft confirmed to him do not entitle Stoyanov to the 'ace' status; nevertheless, the Author considers that based on his outstanding combat activity and career, for which he was awarded the country's top decorations, displayed on this photo, he can clearly be referred to as such, along with his top scoring colleagues.

Three more B-24s were claimed by German pilots from II./JG 51 over Radomir (Major Karl Rammelt of the group staff, Oblt. Otto Schultz and Lt. Taubenberger, respectively); while Uffz. Even from 4./SG 2, flying a Fw 190, was also awarded with a victory over a B-24 at Strumitsa (it could be that the victorious pilot was actually Uffz. Heinz Erren of 4./JG 51). Two more US warplanes (a P-51 and a further B-24) were claimed by Fw 190 pilots of the Gruppe Stab of II./SG 2, at undisclosed locations.

Here is how the US side perceived the Bulgarians' attack: "Missions continued with another bomber escort, to Craiova M/Y in Romania (...). Most of the bombers failed to show up at the rendezvous, west of Sofia, but some enemy fighters did. Five Me 109s were spotted attacking a lone B-24, with three other Messerschmitts nearby. The 95th went to the Liberator's rescue and claimed three of the 109s destroyed (by Lts. Joe Belton, Roy Harman and Jim Holloway) and another damaged (by Lt. Nate Pape). The 96th attacked some other 109s which put in an appearance, claiming four destroyed – one each by Maj. "Ike" Isaacson and Lts. Walt Carroll, Al Mikes and Charlie Pinson. According to the mission report, 'The Me 109 pilots appeared inexperienced, their aircraft old and worn. Several of the aircraft attacking the B-24 still had belly tanks on'. It has to be noted that most of these claims were located 30 miles (48 km) west of Sofia, with a couple north-west of Sofia, at 8:50 and 9:00, respectively. A final claim was submitted by Lt. Cecil Quesseth of the 94th FS for a 'Me-109' around "Skolje" [actually Skopje] attacked on the return leg, at 11:15, which was classified as 'probable'. At the end of the day, the final US victory tally was set at seven 'Me-109s' destroyed over Bulgaria and another one damaged (not counting Lt. Quesseth's claim). This count matches exactly the eight losses of the Bulgarians (four destroyed and four damaged). II./JG 51 lost a Bf 109G-6.

In total, fifteen 'Liberators' and three 'Mustangs' were lost that very busy combat day by the 15th AAF. At the end, the wrecks of six 'Liberators' were located in Bulgarian territory. The four confirmed bomber 'kills' achieved by the Bulgarians were paid for with four destroyed and four damaged Bf 109Gs, as well as the life of one pilot and another one gravely wounded – a heavy toll on the small Bulgarian fighter force.

As noted repeatedly, it's almost impossible to identify all US warplanes that managed to return more or less damaged. Even when such a case is identified, it is unclear where and when the damage was inflicted, was it in connection to the air war over Bulgaria, or not. Such a case was, for example, of a B-24 of the 450th BG, the 721st BS, which had to perform an emergency landing on San Pancrazio air base. The crew of Lt. Eldred, completing its 50th mission that day, had a very close call. The pilot, Lt. White, managed to land with both of his ship's vertical stabilizers shot away, plus a feathered engine, with a wounded man on board. Lt. 'Jack' Gilday of the same squadron returned on two engines only. But he returned, saving the crew and the airplane. A third B-24 returned home damaged, with a dead and a wounded crewman



This pair of propaganda photos was meant to show 'seamless' co-operation between Bulgarian airmen and their new ally, the Soviets, following Bulgaria's about-face of 9 September 1944. The tall Bulgarian officer at right is Polkovnik (Col.) Georgi Drenikov, acting Commander of the Air Forces (from 10 September to 10 October 1944), while the Soviet officer is Lt. Col. Simeon Kaminski of the 3rd Ukrainian Front. The Bulgarian pilots of 2/6. Orlyak seen in the close-up group shot include, from left: Feldfebel Kiril I. Kälvachev, Podporuchik Laljo T. Kolev, Poruchik Nedëlcho D. Bonchev (C/O of 652. Yato) and Podporuchik Petär Kirov (at right, without white lambskin pilot's jacket). The fifth Bulgarian pilot, in the shadow (or the last one in the row on the other photo), might very well be Podporuchik Pavel E. Pavlov. The smooth engine cowling identifies the 'Strela' as a G-2 – sub-type seldom used in combat at that late stage of the war. The wingtip is not painted in white and no white fuselage band is visible. This leads to the conclusion that the photo must have been taken before 19 September 1944, when the white tactical markings were introduced, to prevent 'friendly fire' occurrences between Soviet and Bulgarian warplanes. Curiously, the Luftwaffe-style wide white spiral was retained on the spinner, which would disappear only in 1945.



on board. These cases are not listed as combat losses, even though they certainly were the work of Axis fighters, or flak, and should be credited accordingly.

The next time the USAAF 'visited' Bulgaria was 28 June. On that occasion, the white-starred warplanes did not only pass through Bulgarian airspace on their way to Rumania and back, as was usual in the past months, but a smaller formation separated from the main wave and aimed at local targets. The 138 B-24s of the 304th BW unloaded their payload onto the VMZ (Vazovski Mashinostroitelni Zavodi) military factory in Sopot and the nearby airfield of Karlovo (Marno Pole), as mentioned earlier.

While the former target was largely missed, the airfield and its infrastructure were hit in full and practically rendered useless. Reportedly, a few Bf 109s were destroyed on the ground¹⁰⁵ and another six were damaged. Many other aircraft types were also destroyed and damaged by bomb shrapnel. The American post-strike estimation – done most probably based on an after-raid photo reconnaissance – counted 22 aircraft destroyed on the ground, along with heavily damaged workshops, hangars, barracks and administration buildings.

¹⁰⁵ One of them was Bf 109G-2, 44/7057, of 2/6. *Orlyak*, based on the write-off document dated 21.03.1945. Other two might have been Nos. 94 and 159.

Although nine Bulgarian Bf 109Gs and eleven German ones took off at the sound of the alarm, they could not score against the intruders, who could thus retreat largely unharmed, with the exception of a single loss, B-24H (S/N 42-52701) – a rare confirmed victim of the Bulgarian anti-aircraft artillery – which crashed near the village of Churen, south-west of Plovdiv. 73-victory *Luftwaffe* ace, Knight's Cross bearer (RKT) Oblt. Otto Schultz¹⁰⁶, *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 51, flying on Bf 109G-6 (W.Nr. 165091), was wounded in action in an air combat with 'Mustangs', and had to perform an emergency landing 15 km east of Sofia due to fuel starvation (aircraft broken 75%). Interestingly, no American fighter pilot claimed any victory over Bulgaria that day (although Maj. James Wiley of 4th FS damaged a Bf 109 at 44-17N, 25-38E).

Next day, Bulgarian sources reported that about 120 US bombers targeted the Danube ports of Giurgiu (Romania) and Ruse (Bulgaria). Similarly to the previous day, they were not intercepted by Bulgarian or German fighters. Interestingly, the US source documenting every day of the 15th AAF combat chronology laconically mentions for that day: "there were no major Fifteenth Air Force operations," thus the Bulgarian report must be erroneous. Allied warplanes returned to Bulgaria on the last day of the month, too. This time, reportedly six 'Spitfires' strafed Skopie airfield and the railway station. Again, the chronology of the 15th AAF does not report any incursion to 'Skoplje' (as Skopie was spelled in US wartime documents, based on the Serbian spelling version), because that day the white-starred warplanes were busy over occupied Hungary. Therefore, they most probably were 'Balkan Air Force' (BAF) machines.

Number of combat ready aircraft and aircrew available to 3/6. *Orlyak* in summer 1944*:

| Date | 11.06 | 19.06 | 24.06 | 25.06 | 27.06 | 28.06 | 29.06 | 01.07 |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Aircraft | 21 | 18 | 14 | 9 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 6 |
| Aircrew | 19 | 19 | 18 | 16 | 13 | 12 | 13 | 13 |

*only those dates are listed when there was a change in the numbers

Based on the above table, drawn from the combat diary of 3/6. *Orlyak*, it can be seen that in less than three weeks, from early mid-June to the first of July, the number of serviceable fighter aircraft dropped from 21 to a mere six (28%)!

A highly interesting German document referring to the Bf 109Gs delivered to Bulgaria and the existing situation, dated 12.7.1944, states: "Geliefert: 36 G-2 in 1943. 23 G-2 und 82 G-6 in 1944 [Total: 141]. Totalverluste: 39 Bf 109G. Im reparatur: 71 Flg. mit Schaden von 15%-85%. 10 Flg. im Reparatur mit Schaden unten 15%. Bei Verbänden: 21 Bf 109G (nur 11 klare Flgze.). Ausbildung: II./JG 6 auf der deutscher Flugplatz Sliven. Auch IV./JG 6¹⁰⁷. Umschulung mit Bf 109G-2." [Translation: 36 (Bf 109) G-2s delivered in 1943. 23 G-2s and 82 G-6s delivered in 1944. (Total: 141 aircraft). Total losses: 39 Bf 109G. Under repair: 71 aircraft with damage between 15-85%. 10 aircraft under repair with damage less than 15%. 21 Bf 109Gs are with units (only 11 aircraft are ready for take-off). Training: II./JG 6 and also IV./JG 6 on Sliven airfield, schooling with Bf 109G-2.] On Sliven there was also the *Jagdfliegerlehrkommando der Deutschen Luftwaffenmission Bulgarien* (Fighter Pilot Training Command/Unit of the German *Luftwaffe* Mission to Bulgaria), while the *Fliebertechnische Schule* (Aviation Technical School) was based at Karlovo. For the complete document, see annexes.

The first day US warplanes penetrated Bulgarian airspace in July was the 3rd. Eighteen Bulgarian Bf 109Gs took off to intercept the intruders, but they failed to do so. The *Luftwaffe Jagdfliegern* filed a couple of claims that day, including the one by Uffz. Martin Hain of 8./JG 77 against a B-24 (his third victory), without any location being given, however. Two B-24Hs of 376th BG, 512th BS crashed in Bulgaria.

Next day, a similar air raid was performed, but this time the Bulgarians did not even try to challenge the Americans. On the 9th, the scrambled 13 Bf 109Gs did not clash with US warplanes either, and returned to their base without the job done. Despite *Luftwaffe* fighters not reporting any victory that day, they must have been in the air, performing interception mission, as *Ofhr.* Rudolf Josef Sauer of 4./JG 51, flying on Bf 109Ga-6, W.Nr. 760208¹⁰⁸, White 8, was killed in action east of Belogradchik, 40 km south of Vidin, while reportedly hanging from his parachute (another German source mentions that the pilot opened his chute too late, and crashed to his death). Only one victory claim was submitted by US fighter

¹⁰⁶ Schultz ended the war as a *Hauptmann*. He is credited with over 800 combat missions and 73 air victories.

¹⁰⁷ Identifying the units mentioned in the German document as 'II./JG 6' and 'IV./JG 6' gave considerable headache to the Author, as the *Luftwaffe's* II./JG 6 was formed exactly at the same time period this document was dated, at Königsberg-Devau, Germany, while IV./JG 6 did not exist at all. However, the Fw 190A-equipped II./JG 6 had nothing to do with Bulgaria, as far as the Author is aware of. At the end, the conclusion reached was simple: these are *not* *Luftwaffe* units, but rather Bulgarian ones, namely 2. and 4. *Orlyak/6. Iztrebiteľen Polk* (i.e., 2./6. and 4./6. *Orlyak*, or Group, of the 6th Regiment), with Germanised numbering style.

¹⁰⁸ Another source gives W.Nr. 760288, but this might be a typo. In the 7602xx production block after 760261 there is only one aircraft mentioned in loss lists, 760298 (lost on 22 Feb 1944), which may also be a typo. Built by MWG-Győr, Hungary.

Following the change of allegiance in early September 1944, Bulgarian airmen found themselves allied with Soviet airmen, fighting their erstwhile ally, the Germans.

It was an uneasy alliance, with the Soviets occasionally confiscating aviation fuel and various matériel, as documented in Bulgarian reports. Joint operations were also scarce, both air forces operating in their own designated area. Depicted are airmen of the 149th

Red Banner Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment in front of the unit's Yak-3s, at Yambol airfield, on 18 October 1945.



pilots outside Rumania, the one by P-51 pilot 1st Lt. Ralph W. Peterson of the 4th FS, located 30 miles east of Niš (which is about 30 km SSW of Belogradchik, thus an acceptable location error). The 19-year-old *Ofhr.* Sauer is interred at the Bankya military cemetery (near *Hptm.* Wengel).

The same scenario happened on 15 July, when a total of 26 Bulgarian Bf 109Gs performed an fruitless interception mission. The sole trace of the Bulgarians actually tangling with the Americans is a claim of damaging a four-engine bomber, filed by *Podporuchik* Hristo Kostakev, which was not judged positively, however (0 point). Only the Germans could report two successful attacks (HSS, i.e. *Herausabschuß*, literally 'shoot-out')¹⁰⁹ against B-24s just south of the River Danube, at Rogozina and 'Zagubitsa' (unidentified). Additionally, *Hptm.* Karl Rammelt of *Stab* II./JG 51 took off from Radomir before noon and claimed a B-24 at 10 km west of Aleksandrovac. Indeed, a B-24H (42-95325) fell at Tsiibur, a B-24G (42-78275) near Trebinje, while another one (42-78323) fell at Zajechar.

Bulgarian sources do not report any enemy incursion for 20 July. However, the JG 51 chronology gives a loss for the *Stab* of IInd Gruppe, namely of *Gefr.* Eduard Wolkersdorfer, who disappeared during a combat with P-51s west of Niš, together with Bf 109G-6 (W.Nr. 162435), marked < – (chevron & bar). There is no US air victory claim matching this loss, but S/Ldr. Spencer Whiting of 213rd Sqn. (BAF) claimed a '109 at Rožaje.

Things changed on 22 July, however. That day, ten Bf 109Gs of the 3/6. *Orlyak* took off from Bozhur-ishte to intercept the huge wave of American bombers and their fighter escort returning from Rumania. The Bulgarians were joined by six German Bf 109Gs of II./JG 51 from Värba (Radomir). The Axis fighters (including the Rumanians) performed a joined interception mission, called *Sternflug* (star-shape flight), aimed at destroying US bombers in a joint effort. Led by *Kapitan* Chudomir Toplodolski¹¹⁰, the Bulgarian '109s tangled with the US bombers in the north-western corner of the country. The group leader, along with two of his comrades, *Podofitser* Dimităr Somov and *Feldfebel* Nikola Kralichev, selected a four-engine bomber and dived on it at high speed. Taking subsequent firing passes, the trio managed to shoot down the targeted B-24, which crashed at Kraguyevats (Kragujevac), Serbia. Each of the pilots received a victory point for their feat. Another US bomber was knocked out of the sky, this time by a single pilot, *Podporuchik* Petăr Bochev – the second highest scoring Bulgarian fighter pilot. He was credited with the destruction of a four-engine bomber, which fell at Krusha Mountain, near Babushnitsa (3 points). A final enemy bomber was damaged by the fire of *Podofitser* Marin Tsvětkov of the 672nd *Yato*. He reported the target leaving formation after the strike and starting to descend towards

¹⁰⁹ i.e., 'enemy aircraft separated from the protection of its formation'.

¹¹⁰ Chudomir Toplodolski – like so many other 'royalist' pilots – suffered persecution after the war, at the hands of the Communists. He was fired from the Army in 1948, then incarcerated twice, accused of plotting against the state. Eventually, he was acquitted and released, but only after being tortured repeatedly in prison. Despite studying law, he could find job only as a hand at various construction sites, mixing concrete. He also worked in the copper plant at Pirdop. The legendary captain of the 3/6. Fighter Group, bearer of two Orders of Bravery, third ranking 'ace' pilot, died on 3 May 1987, at the age of 75.



'Strela' pilots gather in front of a Bf 109G-6 in September 1944. Notice the abundance of German-style, but Bulgarian-made airman's clothing worn by the Bulgarians – now fighting their erstwhile ally. Bulgarians (and Russians as well!) enjoyed wearing German-style quality apparels well until the early 1950s. Por. Todor Rozev of 3/6. Orlyak is the pilot at right. Ppor. Gencho D. Ivanov is believed to be the airman in centre. The engine of Rozev's doomed 'Strela', shot down in air combat on 24 June 1944, was found at the moment when this book manuscript was about to be closed (see page 44).

Bosilegrad when it was lost from sight. Tsvëtkov was awarded with two victory points for his action. One Bulgarian Bf 109G was damaged and belly landed. The Germans fighters reported no victories and no losses. Additionally, Rumanian Bf 109G-6 pilot, *Locotenent aviator* Mircea Şenchea of *Gr. 9 vîn.*, claimed a B-24 over northern Bulgaria.

Two B-24s were lost over Bulgaria that day, namely S/N 42-78343 (98th BG, 343rd BS), shot down by enemy aircraft, which crashed at Lovech, and S/N 42-51136 (464th BG, 776th BS), reportedly shot down by flak, whose crash location is somewhere north-west of Pazardzhik. A further B-24 (42-94887 of 449th BG, 716th BS) and a B-17 (42-97725 of 97th BG, 414th BS) crashed in partisan territory, both crews were rescued. Two damaged 'Liberators' of 461st BG had to be abandoned by their crews upon reaching Italy. At least four other B-24s returned home damaged, with dead or wounded crewmembers on board.

In the closing days of July, US bomber and fighter formations crossed Bulgarian airspace on the 26th, 28th and 31st, but no contact was made with Bulgarian fighters, even though they took off to intercept them, on the 26th (with eleven Bf 109Gs) and on the 28th (with twelve Bf 109Gs). German fighters did not claim any victory specifically over Bulgaria, either. However, *Ltn. Günther Schmitz, Kommandeur* of III./JG 77, was credited with his 34th air victory, a B-24 shot down somewhere over the Balkans on 28 July. Indeed, a B-24H (S/N 42-52400) was reported as lost that day, but in Rumania.

The last July day saw the demise of three USAAF warplanes over Bulgaria, a B-24 (S/N 42-72767) damaged over Bulgaria, which eventually crashed at Bor, in Serbia, and a record of two P-51Ds. One of the 'Mustangs' (S/N 44-13516) – piloted by 2nd Lt. Charles L. Jones of the 31st FG, 307th FS, who was flying on his first mission – was lost due to undetermined circumstances SW of Nikopol, while the other one (S/N 44-13364) was reportedly lost in the area of Ploëşti, Rumania. However, the pilot, 1st Lt. Bobbie L. Winn of the 325th FG, 318th FS, was actually captured by Bulgarian soldiers in the vicinity of Oryahovo, and ended up as POW in Camp Shumen. The Bulgarians did not claim a single victory, however, their German allies did, for an impressive four 'Mustangs', as reported by *JaFü Balkan/Lw. Kdo. Südost*. All claims were filed by pilots of 7./JG 77 (namely, *Ltn. Hans Riedel* a double, as well as *Ofw. Fritz Roggenbuch*¹¹¹ and *Uffz. Maximilian Wilhelm Skreba*). Unfortunately, the locations of the claims are not recorded; however, it's known that at that time the *Staffel* was based at Mizil, Rumania, along with the bulk of the parent *Gruppe*, the IIIrd.

On the first day of August, a total of 103 Bf 109Gs were available to the VNVV, of which only 29 were combat ready, however (2/6. *Orlyak*¹¹² mustered 19 serviceable and 35 unserviceable '109s, while 3/6. *Orlyak* had 10 serviceable and 39 unserviceable '109s. Curiously, the fighter regiment staff did not have a single '109 assigned. If one adds the number of German Bf 109Gs available to the single *Luftwaffe* fighter unit stationed in Bulgaria, i.e., elements of II./JG 51, which counted a total of 29 Bf 109G-6s (not all stationed in Bulgaria), the total number of combat-ready fighter aircraft the Axis could face the

¹¹¹ Also spelled Roggenbuck and Roggenbach.

¹¹² 2/6. *Orlyak* moved from Karlovo (Marno Pole) to Barshen, near Sliven, on 1 August.



A row of six 'Strelas' warm their engines prior to takeoff against the new enemy, the Germans, in September 1944. The paintjob sported by the nearest machine is peculiar, as it is dissimilar to the standard German fighter camouflage scheme seen on the aircraft in the background. Light colour squiggles (believed to be Light Grey) appear to cover the uniform dark background colour (believed to be Dark Grey). The layer of darker shade paint extends well under the exhaust pipes, which is also unusual.

Allies with over Bulgaria was fewer than 50. As a comparison, the USAAF had in Italy about 800 fighters and 1,500 heavy bombers at its disposal. Of course, only a fraction was actually crossing Bulgarian airspace, but still, it represented overwhelming numerical air superiority. This quick comparison reveals how meagre the fighter force the Axis could rely on to defend Bulgarian airspace, and Eastern Europe, in general, actually was.

The last month of the anti-Allied activity of Bulgarian airmen started quietly. It was only on 8 August when the first real air alarm of the month sounded. All eighteen combat-ready Bf 109Gs of 3/6. *Orlyak* scrambled from Bozhurishte, but did not find the enemy. Upon landing, one machine broke its undercarriage, pilot was safe.

Two days later, however, the Bulgarian and German defenders did tangle with the American intruders heading towards Rumania, then back. That day, the 3/6. *Orlyak* fighter formation, made up of 15 Bf 109G-6s, was led by a new commanding officer, the 39-year-old veteran *Kapitan* Krăstyu (first name also spelled Krăst'o) Atanasov (former Commanding Officer of the Fighter School at Dolna Mitropoliya), who had been placed in charge the previous day. The Bulgarians took off from Bozhurishte at 10:25. Nine machines of the sister group (2/6.) scrambled moments later. Seventeen *Luftwaffe* Bf 109Gs also joined the fray. The 41 Axis '109s clashed with the US formation in the north-western area of the Kingdom. First, the new group leader, the 'old hand' *Kpt.* Atanasov, and his experienced wingman, *Ppor.* Bochev, started to chase an unfortunate B-24. Reportedly, they finished it off over Nishka Banya. However, this success earned both outstanding pilots only one point each¹¹³.

On the return leg of the US raid against Ploëști oilfields, the Bulgarians were waiting. The bomber formation was spotted crossing the River Danube over Lom, and was then given pursuit in the south-west direction, towards Pirot. This time, *Podporuchik* Petăr Bochev was the *dvoyka* leader, and had *Feldfebel* Aleksandăr Petkovski as wingman. The two fighters closed in and damaged heavily a B-24, which reportedly left the close-knit bomber formation then disappeared from sight. Both pilots were awarded one point each. The final point-earner of the day was *Feldfebel* Stefan Konzov, who attacked another 'Liberator' single-handedly and scored hits. The bomber reportedly crashed at Samokov; despite this, Konzov was awarded with only one point. Actually, two B-24Gs of 376th BG (S/N 42-78320 and 42-78464) crashed in Bulgaria, at Pleven, just south of the Danube. However, this location is about 180 km north-east of Samokov; therefore, they must have crashed due to other reason, possibly due to battle damage suffered over Rumania (there was no German air victory claim filed that day for bombers, only fighters). Also, a newly built B-17G (44-6191) of 97th BG, 342nd BS was heavily damaged by three enemy fighters, but was able to return to its base in Amedola with three wounded crewmembers aboard. The bomber crash landed, was later written off. A P-51D (S/N 44-13436) was lost near Skopie due to mechanical failure, pilot killed.

The *Luftwaffe* had one fatal loss, namely *Gefr.* Hans Irek of 7./JG 51. His mount, Bf 109G-6, white 5 (W.Nr. 140195), was set alight in combat by P-51s of the 325th FG (Cpt. Richard W. Dunkin of the 317th FS claimed a 'Me-109' 30 miles S of Nish). The pilot bailed out successfully, but his parachute was

¹¹³ Many printed sources mention *Kpt.* Atanasov with two victory points.

shredded on purpose by the propeller of a killer 'Mustang'. The unfortunate pilot fell to his death 50 km NNW of Sofia. Based on the Author's count, he was the eighth and last German day fighter pilot killed in action while defending Bulgarian airspace.

A week later, fifteen Bf 109G-6s, wearing black diagonal crosses in a white square, took off from Bozhurishte at the sound of an alarm, shortly after 9 o'clock in the morning. Another huge air armada crossed into Bulgarian airspace from the south-west, heading towards Rumania, as customary. After an quiet patrol flight, the Bulgarian airplanes landed for refuelling. They took off again shortly before noon. This time, the fifteen Bulgarian pilots did spot the enemy warplanes in the region of Petrohan, heading back to their bases, and went after them.

When combat died down, the *Strela* pilots reported six four-engine bombers as damaged severely, but only one shot down, a 'Liberator', which actually crashed within the wartime boundaries of Bulgaria (at Zhostovo, near Skopie), earning the victor three points. It was the 'work' of *Podporuchik* Petăr Bochev, who thus became the second ranking Bulgarian fighter pilot with twelve points on his credit. A B-24H, S/N 42-50298, crashed at Zhostovo, crew became POW. Another B-24G, S/N 42-78159, was also lost, at Skopie, two of the eleven-member crew becoming prisoners of the Bulgarians. A third B-24J, S/N 44-40615, also fell near Skopie. Only one crewmember survived, POW.

The other pilots who reported damaging an enemy bomber each (valuing two points) were: group commander *Kapitan* Krăstyu Atanasov, *Poruchik* Boris Damev, *Poruchik* Petăr Manolev, *Podporuchik* Nikola Nikolov, *Podporuchik* Marin Tsvētkov and *Kandidat podofitser* Kiril Stoyanov. The logbook of one of the victors, Petăr Manolev¹¹⁴, indeed records two combat sorties on 17 August, both aboard *Strela* No. 1. The first one, starting at 9:15 and lasting exactly one hour, was quiet. However, the second one, starting at 11:55 and ending at 12:20 (mission cut short by combat damage), has the following entry: "Wounded in a dogfight between Leskovats and Nish, and after that successfully belly landed on the airfield." Two more '109s were damaged (one in combat and another one during landing). A Bf 109G had to return early to Bozhurishte due to a defective engine. No *Strela* was lost in combat that day.

JaFü Balkan/Lw. Kdo. Südost reported only one victory for a *Luftwaffe* pilot, *Ltn.* Hans Riedel of 7./JG 77, who claimed a P-51 'Mustang' at an undisclosed location in the Balkans. Indeed, P-51B, S/N 42-106455, flown by 1st Lt. Bernard A. Shipp of the 31st FG, 308th FS, crashed near Lom¹¹⁵, at the right bank of River Danube. The pilot of the doomed 'Mustang', which officially was lost due to 'mechanical failure' (one would certainly agree that well aimed bullets do cause mechanical failure in a warplane), bailed out and became prisoner. 1st Lt. Shipp ended up in the notorious POW Camp Shumen, being 'club member' No. 316. Besides the aforementioned three B-24s, five additional B-24s were lost over Bulgaria and one more in Kosovo. It turned out that the 17th of August was one of the darkest days for USAAF warplanes passing through Bulgaria (ten lost aircraft). It was the only occasion when Bulgarian fighter pilots actually 'underclaimed' their air victories.

Taking advantage of the occasional lull in combat, transition courses to the Bf 109G were carried out. These were occasionally peppered with incidents and catastrophes. One last fatal training incident recorded in the annals of the VNVV in the period of the anti-American campaign happened on 12 August, when *Poruchik* Borislav V. Konstantinov was killed in a take-off accident and his Bf 109G destroyed. He was the last fighter pilot to die until Bulgaria's about-face of 9 September 1944.

Besides combat, losses during training also took their toll on the available aircraft strength. Based on an on-board aircraft armament write-off protocol dated 25 August 1944, 3/6. *Orlyak* had to write off a total of eleven Bf 109Gs, spread among the group as follows: three by group staff, three by 672. *Yato*, two by 682. *Yato* and three by 692. *Yato*. One can note the unusually high number of losses of the staff flight, usually made up of four aircraft (with theoretically two more in reserve)¹¹⁶. The distribution of



Photo to send home to family and friends. Notice the so-called 'Morane' antenna mast visible in the background, in the lower left corner. This mast was linked to the RuG 16 ZY type of radio set, typically fitted to late production Bf 109G-6s. The pilot is *Podporuchik* Dimităr D. Sotirov of 3/6. *Orlyak*, killed in action on 22 September 1944.

¹¹⁴ Manolev – a very experienced pilot trainer based at the Fighter Piloting School at Dolna Mitropoliya – joined 3/6. *Orlyak* as commanding officer of the 682. *Yato*, located at Bozhurishte, on 19 July. After a few introductory flights aboard 'Lebed' (Bf 108B) No. 1, he started flying the *Strela* (Bf 109G) on the 24th. His first live combat mission was performed two days later, aboard *Strela* No. 10. He logged eight combat sorties in total against the USAAF, then sixteen in the anti-German campaign, flying mostly with *Strela* No. 1 and 6 (unfortunately, no information about the colour of the fuselage number is known).

¹¹⁵ One internet source claims this particular 'Mustang' crashed in Croatia, which is inaccurate, as the distance between Lom and the nearest point of the wartime Croatian border is about 350 km.

¹¹⁶ Earlier, 2/6. *Orlyak* also had to write off four *Strelas* of the staff unit, after *Kpt.* Boshnakov's *shtab chetvorka* was annihilated by 'Mustangs' on 17 April.



Maintenance work performed on a Bf 109G-6 during a lull in combat activity in September 1944. Only the white, narrow rear fuselage band identifies this warplane as pro-Allies (i.e., pro-Soviet). The wingtips were yet to be painted white. There is no visible trace of the overpainted yellow wingtip and serial number; therefore, most probably the entire wing lower surface had recently been repainted.

one MG 151/20 cannon and two MG 131 heavy machine guns per aircraft proves that no underwing 20-mm (2-cm) cannon gondolas were used by the fighter group at that time.

Two subsequent accidents featured the same pilot, *Feldfebel-shkolnik* (equivalent to Staff Sergeant) Todor Nikolov Tonev, formerly of the D.520-equipped 4/6. *Orlyak*, reassigned to 2/6. *Orlyak* and retraining on the Bf 109G. On 11 August, the student pilot crashed his *Gustav*, 68/7057, on Sliven airfield. The damage was evaluated at 60%. Apparently, Tonev wasn't reprimanded, as he took off again the next day. Apparently, his bad luck stayed, and he crashed his new *Gustav*, 61/7057, also on Sliven. There is no mention of the degree of the damage he inflicted on his mount, or the punishment he received; however, the Author has not met his name again among the fighter pilots.

On 8 August 1944, a note by Messerschmitt AG in Augsburg mentions the delivery of a batch of 50 "Me 109 G-6" to Bulgaria. Ten more followed shortly after. The last documented delivery of a Bf 109G-6 by the Germans happened on 15.08.1944 (see annex for details). Based on the Author's calculations, this may have been the 158th *Gustav* that received a Bulgarian registration number, thus possibly bearing serial number 177/7057. It is known that aircraft No. 176 was officially written off on 16.08.1944, thus was certainly delivered by the Germans (not being the last one). It is also known from Por. Petăr Manolev's logbook that he flew aircraft No. 178 on 24 July 1945, soon after he had transferred a G-10 from Pécs (Hungary) to Bozhurishte first, then to Sliven – probably a "trophy" aircraft. Therefore, the suggestion that aircraft No. 177 may have been the last one delivered by the Germans seems plausible. Based on a few surviving post-accident reports we know that several aircraft were damaged, or destroyed shortly after their handover, before receiving Bulgarian registration numbers. The quantity of such aircraft was certainly low, about a half dozen. This brings *the overall total of Bf 109Gs delivered by the Germans to about 164*. However, this is only a presumption, the final word has to be given by official documents, if they still exist.

After two uneventful combat missions performed by the Bulgarians, on the 18th and 19th August¹¹⁷, both times by a dozen Bf 109Gs, the final clash with the USAAF took place on 26 August, a Saturday. At 10:38, 16 fighters of 3/6. *Orlyak* were ordered to intercept the American bombers on their way back, after attacking German targets in now friendly Rumania¹¹⁸ (at the Danube port of Giurgiu, as well as on and around Otopeni and Băneasa airfields, near Bucharest). In this final combat mission, an American warplane was lost in contradictory circumstances. Officially, a P-51 crashed due to mechanical failure. However, based on Bulgarian recollections, it appears that a P-51C was wrongly identified by P-38s as

¹¹⁷ Despite the Bulgarian fighters not meeting the intruders, one B-24G was lost over Bulgarian territory, on each day.

¹¹⁸ Rumania had unilaterally left the Axis camp in the evening of 23 August 1944, and next day started combat activity against the German forces in Rumania.



a 'Bf 109' and shot down in a 'friendly fire' incident. Indeed, the 'Mustang' of 2nd Lt. Henry A. Wise Jr., a black 'Tuskegee' pilot of the 332nd FG, 99th FS, was lost over Vratsa. He had to bail out when, officially, oil pressure dropped and the engine started to smoke heavily. Lt. Wise bailed out at 43 deg., 05 min. N, 22 deg., 29 min. E (SW Pirot), at 11:15 hrs. He became prisoner for only two weeks (having one of the last 'membership cards' at Camp Shumen, No. 321, of the total of 329), as Bulgaria also bailed out of the Axis camp on 9 September, following Rumania's suit¹¹⁹. Interestingly, there is no 'Missing Air Crew Report' for Lt. Wise, perhaps exactly due to the 'friendly fire' incident, which had to be covered up. Incidentally, Major Warner F. Gardner of the P-38-equipped 95th FS – who had taken over command of the squadron just two weeks earlier – claimed a damaged 'Mc.202' 40 miles (65 km) east of Niš (that location was within the borders of the Bulgarian Kingdom, very close to the location where Lt. Wise vanished). Strange that Gardner's claim was of a different fighter type than the Bf 109s the unit encountered near Niš (see description later). That was the sole US fighter victory claim for the day.

One of the participants of this final combat event was Podporuchik Todor Rozev of 3/6. Orlyak. Here is his recollection, as described in his memoirs¹²⁰: "We took off at 10:38 and headed north-north west. Kapitan Atanasov was leading the orlyak again, 17 aircraft in total. Our yato was flying last in the main group. I and Marin [Tsvetkov] were the last ones in the formation. As his voden [wingman], I was last not only in the yato, but in the whole orlyak, too. (...) That day I flew on a new aircraft, which I had tested a few days earlier and after I insisted, it was assigned to me. Thus, I had two 'Messers' at my disposal. This was normal in these times, as now there were less pilots than aircraft, while at the beginning of the war the ratio [of pilots and machines] was exactly the opposite."

After a short while, the Bulgarians spotted over Vratsa a small American formation made by what Rozev believed were seven P-47s, flying much higher than them. The last one lagged a little behind the rest. The Americans did not attack the Bulgarians, probably because they were inferior in numbers – a rare occurrence. Soon, a large formation of about 40 P-38s appeared as well. After they flew past the Bulgarians, the Americans started a combat turn, preparing to attack the '109s. As Ppor. Rozev was flying as rear guard, his aircraft was the first to be attacked. Indeed, a few moments later he noticed tracers near his starboard wing. The air combat had begun.

All of a sudden, the game changed. A P-51 was thrown into the fray, which completely changed the equation. The 'Mustang' appeared out of nowhere, whizzed past Rozev, trailing thick, black smoke from its engine, and tracers following it! According to Rozev, this one must have been the 7th aircraft from the first formation; therefore, either it was one P-51 along with the P-47s, or all seven were actually 'Mustangs', and he did not identify them properly. "Where did that 'Mustang' come from and who was shooting at it instead of me, the last one in the formation?" asked Rozev himself. "Turning back, I saw the first 'Lightnings', which ruthlessly were spitting fire on their comrade. Obviously, they thought the 'Mustang' was the last aircraft in our formation, because the type looked very much like our 'Messers'! So, the 'Lightning' pilots made the same mistake, like us at Easter [i.e., 17 April, known to Bulgarian airmen as 'Black Easter'], when we suffered six casualties [due to confusing the 'Mustang' silhouette with the '109]. Anything can happen during air combat!" – Rozev concludes rightfully.

The same white, narrow rear fuselage ring is visible on this Bf 109G-2, taken during the anti-German campaign of the autumn of 1944. The wingtips are painted white as well. No serial number is visible on the lower wing surface, which points that probably no number was applied on the fuselage side, either. Notice the small size marking on the fuselage side and wing undersurface. The rudder bottom had been overpainted with a dark colour, probably green. In the background, a Soviet A-20 'Boston' bomber, displaying the same thin white rear fuselage band, can be seen. It is known that A-20Gs of 30 RAP of the Black Sea Fleet, as well as 'Boston B-3s' of 449 BAP, stationed at Vrazhdebna air base in September-October 1944.

119 Lt. Wise recalled post-war: "I was the only Negro in the [Shumen POW] camp. However, I got along as well as the others, and no difference was shown by the Bulgarians or my fellow prisoners. We shared the same beds, same food and same difficulties. We suffered no physical punishment such as torture and beatings."

120 Rozev, Todor: 'Spomeni na Letetsa' (Memoirs of a Pilot), published by IK Staney, Sofia, 1994 (second edition). First edition was published in 1957. See page 76 for the book cover.



Another, wider angle shot taken at the same scene, at the same time, depicts a 'Strela' trio (a mix of G-2 and G-6) during takeoff. The aircraft at left is identical to the one depicted on the previous close-up photograph. It is known that in late September 1944, the Bf 109G-equipped 2/6. Orlyak was based on Vrazhdebna, while 3/6. Orlyak on Bozhurishte airfield, both located nearby the capital, Sofia. None of the fighters wear (yet) a fuselage number.

Rozev continued to turn, preying on the 'Mustang' in trouble. He reportedly finished it off with a series of bursts. He then saw the US pilot bailing out. Rozev continues the story: *"In the most decisive moment of the combat, our group engaged the enemy fighters [the P-38s]. Upon being confronted, they ceased fire immediately, and went into a steep climb. Using that proper moment, I turned the aircraft to the right and with dense fire finished the uninvited guest, the 'Mustang', thus sharing the 'victory' with the 'Lightning' pilots. They, having now superiority in height, tried a new attack, but were not successful. Furthermore, they lost a second aircraft, shot down by Poruchik Stoyanov."*

A colleague of Rozev's on leave happened to visit the army unit where the captured enemy pilot was brought. He told him later that he had met there a black airman, who was happy to be alive! It has to be noted that the combat diary of the 3/6. Orlyak also lists one fighter claimed by the unit that day, except for Stoyanov's; however, there is no victory over a 'Mustang' officially awarded to Rozev (or to any other Bulgarian pilot). Possibly, as Rozev was the last one in the formation, no one saw the P-51 being shot down and then crash, so there was no witness of the event, meaning no official confirmation. As a side note, the discipline of Rozev is questionable, who as a wingman left his *dvoyka* leader alone, unprotected, engaging instead in a dogfight, even when the end result was apparently favourable to him.

The final claims of Bulgarian pilots in the Home Defence campaign were, as follows: a two-engine fighter, which reportedly crashed south-east of Nefela, near Vratsa, credited to the top scoring Bulgarian pilot, *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov (with this point, his final score rose to 15 points). A four-engine bomber, which crashed at Vratnitsa, was claimed as shared by three pilots, namely *Kapitan* Krăstyu Atanasov, *Podporuchik* Petăr Bochev (who thus reinforced his status as the second highest scoring Bulgarian pilot, with 13 victory points) and *Podofitser* Nikola Takov (one point for each pilot). Three other claims, filed against P-38s by *Podporuchik* Georgi Georgiev, *Podporuchik* Dimităr Sotirov and *Kandidat podofitser* Kiril Stoyanov, were not confirmed, thus are recorded in the annals of the VNVV with zero points.

No P-38 is listed as lost in combat over Bulgaria on that day. Despite this, there is a single P-38 loss that might have been caused by enemy fire. P-38J, S/N 43-28795, of the 82nd FG, 97th FS, piloted by F/O Melvin L. Fernow, crashed at Manfredonia, Italy; the pilot survived. The Author found no details on that incident, only that P-38s of the 82nd FG were engaged by about 16 'Me-109s' head-on near Niš, at approx. 11:30. The US description of the encounter went on like: *"they [the Bf 109Gs] showed no desire to fight and were easily driven off, in the process of which [Major Warner F.] Gardner damaged an Mc 202 (see note on previous page)."* No combat loss was recorded in the US fighter group's annals. However, if that particular 'Lightning' was only damaged in combat and managed to limp back until it reached the Italian shores of the Adriatic Sea, where port Manfredonia was located, Bulgaria's 'top gun' Stoyan Stoyanov's final victory claim has some merit¹²¹.

Besides the aforementioned 'Mustang', the Americans lost other warplanes over Bulgaria that final combat day¹²². Three B-24s crashed during the mission, one near Vratnitsa, Macedonia (S/N 42-78240), another one in the Mitrovitsa region, in Serbia (S/N 41-28862), while the last one crashed in the Mostar area (S/N 42-78332). Four crewmembers of a fourth 'Liberator' (S/N 42-52635), of the 484th BG, bailed out over Bulgaria in error¹²³. These were the final USAAF losses over Bulgaria. In total, during the eleven-month-long air war (as well as 'Operation Tidal Wave' of 1 August 1943), close to one hundred USAAF

121 In their memoirs, both Stoyanov and Rozev are absolutely sure about properly identifying the peculiar-looking twin-boom US fighter type. They clearly describe lots of close encounters with P-38s throughout the war, so the Author believes credit for proper type identification must be given to them.

122 There are interrogation reports of crews of a 'Mustang' and a 'Liberator', taken on 1 September 1944. However, the Author has no access to those files surviving in Bulgarian archives.

123 The 'Liberator' returned home safely. It was lost over Austria on 7 February 1945 (MACR 12129).

warplanes were lost over the wartime territory of the Tsardom of Bulgaria, or in the immediate vicinity to the west, for all reasons (for details on individual cases, see comprehensive USAAF losses table).

After this final mission of 26 August, there were no further bombing raids conducted against Rumania, a country which in the meantime had 'jumped the Axis ship'. Bulgaria was spared US bombs as well. Only air transport missions were flown to evacuate the over one thousand Allied airmen who had been captured earlier and now were released by the Rumanian authorities (Operation 'Reunion'). However, no Bulgarian fighter was raised to intercept the heavily defended transport aircraft¹²⁴.

The last statistics available for the period Bulgaria was still in the Axis camp, dated 30 August 1944, lists the following Bf 109Gs in the VNVV roster:

- *6-i Iztrebitelen Polk Shtab*: 5 Bf 109G
- *2-i Iztrebitelen Orlyak*: 18 serviceable and 36 unserviceable Bf 109G (exceeding by 14 the standard strength of 40 aircraft),
- *3-i Iztrebitelen Orlyak*: 10 serviceable and 39 unserviceable Bf 109G (exceeding by 9 the standard strength of 40 aircraft).

The final invoice, No. 2374 of 29 August 1944, issued by the RLM for the last batches of delivered Bf 109Gs¹²⁵, lists the following hand-overs¹²⁶:

| No. of Invoice | Date of Invoice | No. and type | Total price (RM) | Werknummern | Delivery date/offer |
|----------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------------------------|--|--|
| 6003337 | 28.08.1944 | 3 Bf 109G-2 | 774 720 | 13517, 13546, 14803 | (offer of 1.02.1944) |
| 6002577 | 2.08.1944 | 12 Bf 109G-2 | 3 098 880 | 10360, 10476, 13512, 13793, 13878, 13937, 13961, 14220, 14582, 14626, 14656, 14710 | 08-11.1943 (offer of 1.02.1944) |
| 6002578 | 2.08.1944 | 1 Bf 109G-2 | 205 990 | 14561 | 31.08.1943 (offer of 15.02.1944) |
| 6002576 | 2.08.1944 | 4 Bf 109G-2 | 1 015 048 | 13449, 13660, 14662, 14816 | 3x15.12.1943, 1x13.01.1944 (offer of 26.04.1944) |
| 6003335 | 28.08.1944 | 50 Bf 109G-6 | 17 072 300 (unit price: 341 446) | 161058, 161329, 161330, 161331, 161382, 161391, 161461, 161462, 161470, 161472, 161473, 161476, 161477, 161478, 161479, 161481, 161482, 161693, 161694, 161698, 161699, 161705, 162330, 162416, 162419, 162472, 162480, 162482, 162508, 162516, 162520, 165524, 162527, 162540, 162543, 162561, 162585, 162702, 162703, 162719, 162992, 163010, 163012, 163013, 163318, 163321, 163322, 163323, 163698, 161434 | 17x5.03.1944, 32x27.07.1944, last one sent by rail on 16.01.1944 (no confirmation that 161434 actually arrived). 163698 might have been 162698 |
| 6003338 | 28.08.1944 | 10 Bf 109G-6 | 3 414 460 (unit price: 341 446) | 166017, 166089, 166098, 166105, 166109, 166112, 166113, 166116, 166119, 166122 | N/A |

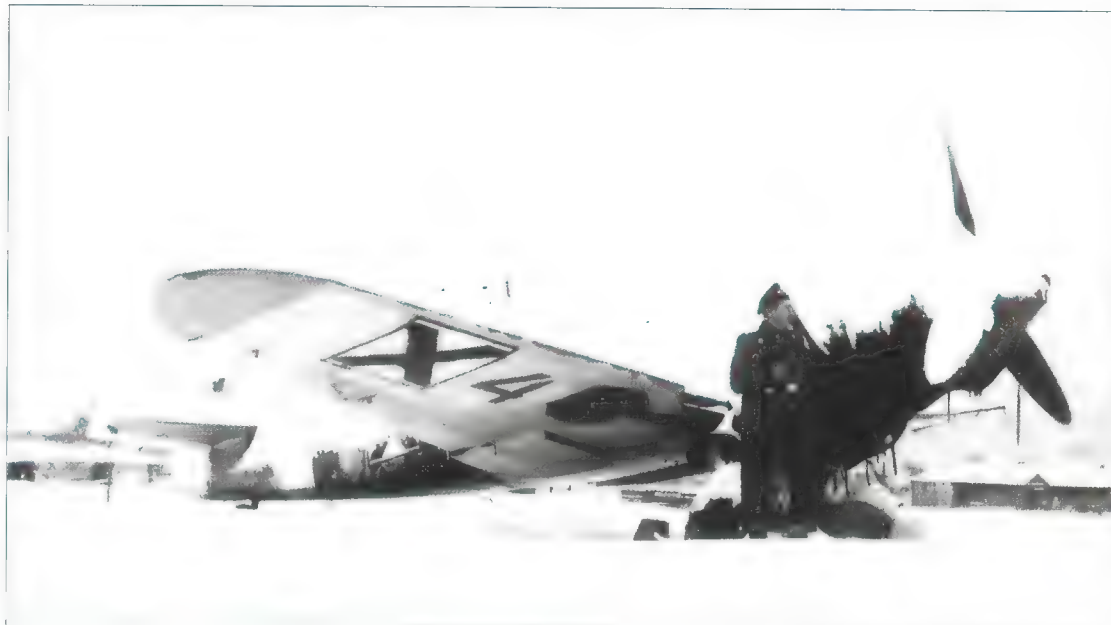
Due to the swift change in Bulgaria's political orientation, the Germans most probably never received full payment for the aircraft handed over to their (by then former) ally. Moreover, many of these fighters were used in combat against German troops in the following months, as described later on.

¹²⁴ One final 'Lightning' was lost on the last day of August, namely P-38J, S/N 44-23196, of 1st FG, 71st FS, piloted by Lt. Jesse Dorris. It crashed 32 km south-east of Nish. *Uffz.* Hans Langer of 5./JG 51 claimed a P-38 15 km west of Pirot (same area).

¹²⁵ It has to be noted that the listed *Werknummern* don't always match with those included in the comprehensive list of Bf 109Gs handed over to Bulgaria (see annex). Further research of individual aircraft is needed.

¹²⁶ Many thanks to Nikolay Katsarov for his last-minute support with this important document.

This is a peculiar photograph of a 'Strela'. Although covered by about 25 cm (10 inches) of fresh snow, which hides most of the details of Bf 109G, No. 4, several important features are still clearly visible: white rear fuselage band, elevators and rudder, but yellow lower wingtip. Also, while there is a serial (board) number painted on the wing under-surface (red, or green), no matching number is visible on the fuselage. All these details point to a plausible explanation, namely that the photo was taken during the winter of 1944/1945, when the white tactical markings were used and often no serial number was applied on the fuselage. The starboard wing could be a replacement wing, from an older aircraft, hence the retained pro-Axis yellow lower wingtip. The wing lower surface shows traces of repainted areas under the serial number and outside the marking. The meaning of white rudder (also seen on a couple of D.520s) is not yet understood, but probably denotes a unit (krilo/yato/orlyak) leader's mount.



Overview of the Home Defence Campaign

Summing up the activity of the Bulgarian fighter pilots in defence of their homeland, it can be stated that they did their best to perform the task assigned to them with the meagre resources they had at their disposal. Although they were generally competent and courageous (or 'adroit and plucky', as a *Luftwaffe* Colonel characterised them in his report quoted below), less than satisfactory training, combined with generally inadequate marksmanship, as well as uncoordinated air deployment and occasional lack of discipline further diminished their overall performance. As highlighted earlier, there were never enough combat ready fighters to face the enemy – intruding in Bulgarian airspace by the hundreds – with a certain chance of success. Therefore, American day bombers could bomb Bulgarian targets virtually with impunity, poor weather being their biggest obstacle in fully achieving their combat goals.

Here is how *Luftwaffe* Oberst Dr. W. Walther¹²⁷ of the 8th *Abteilung* of the *Stab/Dt. Lw-Mission in Bulgarien* summed up his personal experiences while assigned to Bulgaria for about a year, from May [officially 9 June] 1943 onwards (note: his blunt style and direct presentation of his findings summed up in his report originally not intended for publication are quoted *ad verbatim*, and the conclusions are solely his, benefiting from hindsight)¹²⁸:

"III. Achievements of the Mission [i.e., The *Luftwaffe* Mission to Bulgaria].

- 1, **Training.** Given the size of the training detachments, which were always relatively weak in numbers, the initial success achieved by the defences was satisfactory, but the final result was in no relation to the personnel and materiel expended.
 - a, Bulgarian fighter pilots were adroit and plucky, but were however so weak numerically that they played no important part, especially after the first losses. STUKA and bomber pilots had to be retrained on fighter aircraft in order to fill the gaps. The German training officer, who subsequently incorporated the fighter forces in Bulgaria as Jagdfliegerführer (Controller of Fighter Operations) in the South Eastern fighter command network, had at first to take over the command of what was during the first month of the air attacks the only Bulgarian ME 109 fighter Gruppe. (...)
 - c, Thanks to the technical gifts of the Bulgarian trainees, aeronautical technical training was a success. The numbers of aeronautical technical personnel available were therefore always in excess of requirements. (...)
- 3, **Development.** The friendly collaboration existing between the Bulgarian Air Force and the *Luftwaffe* Mission to Bulgaria, (...) proved its value insofar as the Chief of the Mission, Count Schönborn¹²⁹ (suc-



Front cover of former fighter pilot, Todor Rozhev's memoirs, published in 1957 (see page 41 for details).

¹²⁷ Oberst Dr. Wilhelm Walther, transferred to *Stab/Dt. Lw-Mission in Bulgarien* on 9.06.1943.

¹²⁸ Origin of document is the 'Supreme Headquarters Intelligence Party (OKL). Intelligence Report No. 35. The German Air Forces Mission to Bulgaria' (undated), translated to English and submitted by the author of the report to the US Air Staff Post Hostilities Requirements, Section IV, H 2 (A.I. 12/USSTAF/M.35/), dated 29th August 1945.

¹²⁹ Oberst Clemens Graf von Schönborn-Wiesentheid (3.04.1905 – 30.08.1944). Appointed *Luftattaché* to the *Gesandtschaft* in Sofia and Chief of the Lw Mission to Bulgaria in early July 1944.



This late production Bf 109G-6 bogged down in mud is being assisted by ground crewmen and soldiers, sometime in September 1944. The aircraft does not appear to have a coloured board number on its fuselage. This assumption is reinforced by the fact that no number is visible on the lower wing surface either. Only a very thin white ring, completed by a small white area applied only on the lower wingtips, are visible. The engine cowl- ing painting style is peculiar to the aircraft of the 166xxx production batch built at Regensburg. The Finns, Rumanians and Hungarians also received a number of aircraft from this batch.



Cpt. Nikolay Boshnakov (officially 4 victory points, plus 2 more added by hand in the 2/6. Orlyak's combat diary) reports to Lt. Gen. Damyan Velchev, Minister of War, sometime in late 1944.

Maj. Krăstyu Atanasov (5 victory points) is at his right, while Cpt. Stoyan Stoyanov (15 victory points) at his left. By then, the Iron Cross had long before disappeared from Stoyanov's chest, as did the German pilot's wings.



cessor of General von Schönebeck¹³⁰) received intelligence of politico-military developments and intentions [in the early days of September 1944, in connection to the imminent coup d'état, D.B.], so that the withdrawal of the staff of the German Air Force Mission [from Bulgaria] could be carried out in good time and without any particular friction or losses. Three days prior to the withdrawal Count Schönborn was killed in action in the air.¹³¹

Officially, a total of about 1,000 combat sorties were flown by Bulgarian fighters of the 6th Polk against US warplanes. However, only one-third of the sorties actually involved air combat. Interestingly, if individual sorties are summed up based on all the fighter squadrons' reports (1/6., 2/6., 3/6., the short lived 4/6., as well as the Fighter School), the end result is about 50% higher! The élite 3/6. *Orlyak* (equipped all along with the Bf 109G) reported 918 combat sorties, while the second ranking 2/6. *Orlyak* (initially equipped with the D.520, then switched to the Bf 109G) about 450 combat sorties. The difference is difficult to explain. Probably, different reports made by different branches of the air force at different times were included in the final totals.

Bulgarian fighter pilots, flying primarily on the Bf 109G, as well as the D.520, but also on rare occasions the obsolescent Bf 109E, Avia B.135 and B.534, were officially credited with the destruction of a total of 54 enemy aircraft (37 bombers and 17 fighters)¹³². A further 78 aircraft were reported as damaged (probably included slightly damaged aircraft, when zero points were awarded). Bulgarian anti-aircraft artillery crews claimed 38 enemy aircraft destroyed within the country's pre-war boundaries, 21 more in the newly acquired territories (i.e., Macedonia and Greece). In total, they were officially credited with 69 confirmed 'kills' and 66 others probable (including day and night bombers)¹³³. Furthermore, German fighter pilots and flak crews claimed significant number of additional victories; however, the Author has no official final tally of these claims. They have to be pieced together by individual cases.

The Author made his own calculations. Accordingly, of the number of air-to-air victories, 37 aircraft were credited to Bulgarian Bf 109G pilots – the subject of this chapter – while 40 more were significantly damaged. When individual scores of *all* Bulgarian fighter pilots are summed up (see annexes), the result gives a total of 51 (37+13+1) enemy aircraft destroyed and 50 (40+8+1+1) damaged in air combat. Based again on the Author's calculations, this overall result amounts to a total of 216 Bulgarian air victory points (166+45+3+2)¹³⁴. The two statistics (the official total, published by the VNVV HQ and the one

130 Gen. Maj. Carl-August von Schönebeck (19.01.1898 – 4.09.1989). On 1.09.1939, appointed *Militärischer Berater u. Luftattaché* at the *Gesandtschaft* in Sofia, concurrently also appointed as *Chef der Sonderstab Bulgarien (Lw)*, later *Dt. Lw. Mission Bulgarien*. Credited with 8 air victories (in WW I).

131 He was killed in a Fi 156 *Storch* crash near Sofia, on 30 August 1944.

132 The official list of individual air victories gives a total of 46 destroyed and 70 damaged aircraft (for details, see annex).

133 Based on Order No. 78/12.12.1944 of the Commander of Anti-air Defence. Notice the discrepancy in victory numbers.

134 The first number refers to the performance of the Bf 109G pilots, the second one to the D.520 pilots, while the third and fourth ones to the Bf 109E and Avia B.135 pilots (credited with air victory points).

calculated by the Author by adding up the individual scores) are surprisingly close; although they do not actually match, which is not an uncommon occurrence. In reality, actual USAAF losses to Bulgarian fighters were smaller, estimated by the Author at about 35 aircraft (the principal cause of the discrepancy is that several pilots fired at the same target, at different times).

In an unpublished German-language manuscript signed by Todor Vălkov¹³⁵ – son of prominent Bulgarian air force officer Col. Vasil P. Vălkov – the following USAAF loss figures are put forward, based on published official Bulgarian sources: 37 four-engine bombers (B-17 and B-24), 15 P-38s and 1 P-51 were shot down confirmed, while 47 four-engine bombers (B-17 and B-24), 3 two-engine bombers (B-25) and 21 P-38s were damaged in air combat. The total of these figures is 53 shot down and 71 damaged enemy aircraft. Vălkov mentions that these numbers were officially recognised by Order No. 78/28.12.1944 issued by the Air Force HQ. He also gives the total Bulgarian combat losses at 24 aircraft shot down and 18 damaged. Of the aircrew, 16 fighter pilots died and 5 were wounded in air combat. These numbers, again, don't match the Author's calculations, but are close.

It has to be noted that at present time specialised Bulgarian authors somewhat exaggerate the results achieved by Bulgarian fighter pilots in battling the Americans, particularly in regard to the number of damaged ones, claiming that 56 warplanes were shot down and 83 damaged in total¹³⁶. Nedialkov also claims that “*for the loss of each Bulgarian fighter, three American aircraft went down.*”¹³⁷ This claim is misleading, however, as certainly not all American warplanes that crashed on Bulgarian territory were destroyed by the Bulgarians. Another classic source on Bulgarian military aviation, the tome authored by Yordan Milanov¹³⁸, puts the total number of American aircraft destroyed over Bulgaria to 53 (37 bombers and 16 fighters), while the damaged ones amount to 57 (41 bombers and 16 fighters). This number is much closer to what the Author has calculated (51 and 50, respectively).

On Bulgarian side, officially 27 fighters were completely lost in action, many more in air bombings and accidents. Of the 27 lost warplanes, 23 perished together with their crew, while four pilots saved their lives by bailing out¹³⁹. A further 18 fighters were damaged in air combat, or force landings during combat sorties. Another 18 Bf 109Gs were lost, or heavily damaged, during training. Based on the Author's own calculations, a total of eleven Bf 109G pilots died in air combat, one more was killed while hanging on his chute. Five more bailed out successfully. The same categories for D.520 pilots were 4+1=5 killed in action, plus two bailed out and landed alive. Total: 17 pilots KIA. Several others died while on combat missions, without enemy interference.

If one compares the number of American warplanes officially confirmed as destroyed by Bulgarian pilots (54) to the number of destroyed Bulgarian fighters (27), the overall ratio favours the defenders 2 to 1. In reality, this ratio would be more balanced, but would still favour the Bulgarians at about 1.3:1, as estimated by the Author. This is an outstanding achievement for Bulgarian fighter pilots, in view of their limited numbers, as well as the resources and capabilities available to them. Their sacrifice in defending their homeland must be respected and told, to the Bulgarians and the world, alike.

Poruchik Stoyan Stoyanov, top scoring Bulgarian fighter pilot – officially credited with 15 victory points, amounting to four enemy aircraft individually shot down (2 x ‘Liberator’, 2 x ‘Lightning’, equal to 2x3+2x1=8 points), one more destroyed, shared with two other pilots (‘Fortress’, equal to 1 point) and three more damaged (3x‘Liberator’, equal to 3x2=6 points), as well as one ‘efficiently attacked’ (‘Lightning’=0 point)¹⁴⁰ – was declared ‘hero of the fighter units’. He was awarded with the highest Bulgarian wartime decoration, the ‘Military Bravery Cross, IIIrd Grade’ on 22 October 1944, and exceptionally promoted to the rank of Major (after being promoted to Captain only five weeks earlier!).

Veteran pilot and dean of Bulgarian airmen in the early 2000s, ret. Col. Petăr Manolev (performed 18 combat sorties aboard the Bf 109G and participated in nine air combats), summed up to the Author in Sofia on 22 May 2004 laconically his thoughts about the performance of the Bulgarian fighter pilots in the air war in one concise sentence: “*our fighter aviation washed off the smeared face of Bulgaria*”.

135 Walkow, Todor: ‘Die Geschichte der Bulgarischen Luftstreitkräfte bis zum 9.09.1944’ (‘The history of the Bulgarian Air Force until 9.09.1944’), Part II (1919-1939) and Part III (1939-1944), with five Appendices (undated manuscript).

136 Nedialkov, Dimitar: ‘The History of Bulgarian Air Power’, Albatros MDV, Sofia, 2012, p. 217.

137 Idem

138 Milanov, Yordan: ‘Văzdushnite Voyski na Bălgariya Prez Voynite’ (1912–1945), or ‘Bulgarian Air Force at War (1912–1945)’, ‘Eăr Grup 2000’ Publ., Sofia, 2008, p. 349.

139 Idem

140 There are various victory totals credited to Stoyanov, published in printed media, or circulated on the internet. These are ranging from four aircraft destroyed, two shared and three more damaged (Stefan Semerdjev, *Nejlepši bulharský stíhač, Lieutenant Stojanov*, in: *Historie a plastikové modelářství*, No. 7/1998), to five destroyed, one shared (1/3rd) and three damaged (Dimitar Nedialkov, ‘Bulgarian fighters’, part II, Propeller Publishing, Sofia, 2006, p. 78). The author took the information published in ‘Vestník VVS’ newspaper, an official publication of the Bulgarian Army, issue No. 18 of October 1997, page 6, as reference.

Turning Against the Germans

In early September 1944, VNVV High Command – along with other Bulgarian political and military decision makers – sensed the “winds of change” and secretly prepared for the exit from the Axis camp.

Realizing that the Red Army advancing through Rumania would show up at the country’s northern borders within days, the government of PM Ivan Bagryanov announced Bulgaria’s neutrality on 26 August and ordered German forces to leave the country, or to be disarmed. On 2 September, a new government was sworn in, led by PM Konstantin Muraviev, which cut diplomatic relationship with Germany, asked the USA and UK for a truce and started withdrawing the main Bulgarian forces from the occupied territories, particularly Macedonia. This was not enough, though, and the Communist-led *Otechestven Front*, i.e. ‘Fatherland Front’ (OF), committed a coup d’état on 9 September and declared war on Germany and the other Axis nations. The OF Government, headed by Kimon Georgiev, also signed a cease-fire treaty with the Soviet Union and unilaterally allied Sofia with Moscow, pretty much like Bucharest did two weeks earlier.

Before the about-face could actually take place, the Soviet Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, delivered a note to the Bulgarian Government, which declared a state of war of the USSR with the neutral (in the German-Soviet war) Bulgarian Kingdom, on 5 September. Three days later, the first Red Army unit crossed the Bulgarian border and started the occupation of north-eastern Bulgaria, the region of southern Dobrudzha. The Bulgarian Army was ordered not to resist. A practically bloodless coup d’état took place on 9 September, as mentioned earlier. Bulgaria officially declared war on the IIIrd Reich. By then, however, Bulgarian troops had already engaged in fierce combat with German forces in Macedonia.

In those turbulent days, *Luftwaffe* air units retreated from Bulgaria proper mostly unscathed. It was *Obstlt.* Paul-Friedrich Daries (*Offz. zbV. DLM Bulgarien*) who lead his men out of Sofia and surroundings, on 6 September 1944. What they left behind, alongside the warplanes and other matériel given to their ally, were the graves of their comrades who died in Bulgaria, including the one of *Hauptmann* Gerhard Wengel, the venerable *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./JG 5, who fell in combat while defending Sofia on 10 January 1944. Soon, the last *Luftwaffe Jagdflieger* unit, II./JG 51, evacuated east to Hungary.

The Bulgarians had to retreat hastily from peripheral areas controlled by the Germans (e.g., occupied Greece, Macedonia), leaving behind sizeable amounts of matériel. One prime example was the large Aviation Repair Shop at Skopie airfield, shared with the Germans. When news of the Bulgarians’ about-face reached Skopie, the Germans were obviously not pleased by their Balkan allies’ sudden defection.

Aircrew gather around a Bf 109G-6 for a group shot on a warm autumn day of 1944. Apparently, the large dog stole the show.



Therefore, the Bulgarian personnel had only minutes to evacuate the premises, to run away with virtually only their shirts on their backs. They left behind 23 *Strela* G-s¹⁴¹, as well as one of each of the following types: *Tsyklop*, *Dogan*, *Soyka* and *Uragan*. Besides aircraft, aero engines were abandoned as well, amounting to about 37 DB 605s, as well as a couple of Argus As 410s and a single Hispano-Suiza. Other spare parts and war matériel were dumped as well. This was the single largest loss of *Strela* suffered by the Bulgarians (next one was the air bombing of Karlovo main air base in June 1944)¹⁴². Later, Bulgarian warplanes would return to Skopie in anger, attempting to destroy the warehouse and hangar, along with the goods they had hastily left behind. They did not succeed, however, as the Germans moved the airplanes and engines away after their seizure. When Skopie air base was taken back by Bulgarian troops in mid-November, there was no trace of the *Strelas* any more.

The new enemy meant a totally new task for the embattled VNVV. From then on, Bulgarian warplanes had to perform tactical combat missions, particularly short- and long-range reconnaissance, close air support for their own troops, as well as bombing and ground attack against German equipment and positions. It was a marked shift from the air interdiction role against USAAF fighters and bombers performed previously.

The two Bf 109G-equipped fighter groups took part in the anti-German operations from the beginning. On 1 September 1944, the VNVV could rely on the following number of Bf 109Gs: 16 serviceable and 34 unserviceable *Strelas* with 2/6. *Orlyak*, and 18 serviceable and 32 unserviceable *Strelas* with 3/6. *Orlyak*, totalling 100 aircraft. A few more were with training units, like the Fighter School, as detailed in the chart below. A German report by *Gen. Qu. 6. Abt. (I)* from September 1944, most probably relying on information submitted by Bulgarian personnel still loyal to the Germans, estimated the number of Bf 109Gs available to the Bulgarians in the previous month to 70, of the total of 123 delivered (this latter number must be in error, as overall deliveries were certainly higher).

On 4 September 1944, the order of battle of the VNVV fighter force consisted of¹⁴³:

6. Fighter Polk

Command post at Boyana, staff and liaison squad at Gabarevo (staff returned to Karlovo next day)

1/6. *Orlyak* (staff, 612., 622., 632. *Yato*), D.520 – Asen airfield

2/6. *Orlyak* (staff, 642., 652., 662. *Yato*), Bf 109G – Sliven airfield

3/6. *Orlyak* (staff, 672., 682., 692. *Yato*), Bf 109G – Bozhurishte airfield

4/6. *Orlyak* (staff, 712., 722. *Yato*) – disbanded, personnel transferred to other fighter *orlyatsi*

1. Fighter training course – divided into 1, 2, 3 *Orlyatsi*

2. Fighter training course – Asen airfield

Fighter school – Dolna Mitropoliya airfield

Next day, the Bulgarian Minister of Defence, Maj. Gen. Ivan Marinov¹⁴⁴, ordered the VNVV by ‘telephogram’ No. 1166 to perform air support for the besieged 1st Bulgarian Army Corps, which had been attacked by the Germans in the Niš-Kriva Palanka area, as soon as the possibilities would permit. However, the Bulgarian air units, fighters included, were stationed far away from the new front lines in the western area of the country; therefore, they had to deploy first to closer airfields, located around Sofia. Accordingly, 2/6. Fighter *Orlyak* moved from Sliven to Vrazhdebna, while 3/6. *Orlyak* stayed at Bozhurishte, also near Sofia. Aviation fuel, 7.92 mm and 20 mm (2 cm) cal. ammunition were also moved to the new location. A Ju 52/3m transport was ordered to land on Sliven and Rechitsa airfields to collect all Bf 109 external fuel tanks and ferry them to Bozhurishte. On 6 September, all VNVV air units were placed on combat alert. However, it took a couple of days more until the first combat missions could actually be performed.

The very first combat mission in the anti-German campaign took place on 8 September. This initial mission, enemy target interception in Bulgarian airspace, didn’t go smoothly, however. The *Strelas* of 3/6. *Orlyak* took off in alarm at 10:35, but did not find the enemy in the area reported by the aerial surveillance system. The Bf 109G-6 flown by *Podponuchik* Nikola Vălchev Nikolov¹⁴⁵ was set on fire most probably by ‘friendly’ anti-aircraft fire at the strategically important Ihtiman. The pilot escaped by

141 Incidentally, precisely 23 *Strelas* were officially written of on 23 October 1944, as follows: 50, 66, 73, 76, 79, 84, 89, 96, 99, 101, 103, 113, 115, 120, 121, 132, 140, 143, 150, 151, 152, 155 and 157. This must be more than mere coincidence!

142 It is unknown how many Bulgarian Bf 109s were in the Messerschmitt repair centre at ASAM-Pipera, Rumania, at the Rumanians’ about-face of 23 August 1944, if any. In case there were some Bulgarian assets over there, obviously all were lost.

143 Most of the data in this chapter were taken from a hand-written combat diary of the VNVV, covering the period between 4 September and 10 October 1944. The Author wishes to thank Jaroslav Kreč for translating the hand written document, which was beyond his ability to read Cyrillic text.

144 Airman during WW 1, in the inter-war period military attaché to France, then various commanding positions in the army.

145 The unit’s combat diary mentions his name as Nikola Vălchev.

A series of photos taken at Vrazhdebna airfield, during the early winter of 1944. Bf 109G-6, White 3 (no outline), serves as décor for the pilots' photo shoot. One of the depicted five airmen on the photo on the next page (the second from right, wearing a pilot's jacket), appears to be Podporuchik Krum Atanasov of 2/6. Orlyak. Another pilot, seen either sitting on the starboard wing root (centre photo), or standing alone on the port wing root (bottom photo), or sitting on the engine cowling, with a medal on his chest, is Podporuchik Nikola Nachev of the same fighter group. On the photo on next page, top, the pilot standing at right is Podofitser Atanas Matev, whose 'Strela', White 4, is depicted on page 134.





bailing out, the aircraft was obviously destroyed. This *Strela* was the very first Bulgarian aircraft lost in the anti-German campaign. The first one in a long series of losses to come¹⁴⁶.

On 9 September – officially, the first day of the anti-German campaign – at 14:40, a *krilo* of the 672. *Yato*, 3/6. *Orlyak*, led by *Poruchik* Boris Damev, took off from Bozhurishte to perform armed reconnaissance mission over Niš airfield, coupled with ground attack. *Podofitser* Dimităr Somov returned home early due to engine failure. The remaining three Bulgarians spotted six to eight *Luftwaffe* Bf 109G fighters parked on the tarmac, which they subsequently strafed and reportedly destroyed four (another source gives six) of them (actually, there were no German losses). However, this mission resulted in the first combat fatality. Over Niš, the Bulgarians were ‘welcomed’ by their erstwhile ally with fierce anti-aircraft fire that hit the low-flying Bf 109G of *Podporuchik* Marin “Marincho” Tsvētkov – third ranking top Bulgarian pilot by the number of victory points, with two confirmed and five damaged enemy aircraft on his tally. The fighter began to smoke and disappeared from sight. It turned out that he belly landed his stricken fighter in the Nishka Banya area, which caught fire, or landed already on fire. The wreck was later found by Bulgarian troops. However, the pilot was missing. Later on, his grave was found nearby. One version, circulated in Communist times, was that Tsvētkov survived the crash landing and was executed by the ‘Fascists’ (i.e., German troops). However, Rozev is clear in his memories: ‘(...) *Poruchik Damev all the time called him on the radio and was persistently ordering him to bail out, but he was not responding... He never called... I did not see a parachute, either. The aircraft disappeared behind the nearby hills and never appeared again. We easily spotted the burning machine by the smoke trail, but Marin did not get out of it! (...) Later, after the combat activities ceased, a group of airmen was sent to the place, where we saw the burning machine for the last time. There they found a recently dug grave, with a small wooden cross, on which a Serbian ploughman, who had buried him, inscribed: “Here rests a Bulgarian eagle”*. The leader’s mount was also damaged by flak fire. The other fighter party of 3/6. *Orlyak* targeted Skopje airfield and surrounding area. However, they could not locate any enemy aircraft in the open, or any other worthwhile target, thus returned to Bozhurishte at dusk, without firing their guns.

Taking off at around 16:00, 14 Bf 109G-6s of 3/6. *Orlyak*, led by the group commander, *Kpt.* Krāstyū Atanasov, provided air cover for Ju 87D-5 dive bombers and Do 17M level bombers targeting German ground units at Bitolya (Bitola), close to the Greek-Albanian border. Despite accurate flak fire, which hit a *Shtuka* (Ju 87) and an *Uragan* (Do 17), compelling both to force land (the *Shtuka* pilot actually defected to the Germans), all Messerschmitts returned to their home base safely. The first combat day’s final mission in the late afternoon was also without incident.

The same day, a non-combat accident happened on Sliven airfield, where student pilot *Podporuchik* Hristo Krāstev Nedyalkov of 2/6. *Orlyak* broke the main undercarriage of *Strela* No. 111/7057 during landing.

146 The very next day, an Arado Ar 196A *Akula* seaplane defected to Beykoz (neutral Turkey), to escape from Soviet rule in Bulgaria, thus being the second aircraft loss of the VNVV.



This 'Strela' broke its starboard main undercarriage leg during taxiing on frosty runway, sometime during late 1944/early 1945. Notice the peculiar Bulgarian light grey camouflage colour applied all over the upper wing surfaces and fuselage spine in the form of squiggles and straight, or zig-zag lines. By contrast, light grey was applied on the horizontal surfaces as rare blotches. The rear fuselage band and wingtips were painted white. There is no coloured individual number applied on the fuselage side.

On 10 September, 2/6. *Orlyak* was now located at Karlovo¹⁴⁷, while 3/6. *Orlyak* stayed on Bozhur-ishte. The first interception mission against German aircraft which penetrated Bulgarian airspace was a failure. At 06:20, six German bombers, escorted by five fighters, flying from the west over Deve Bair Pass¹⁴⁸ in the direction of Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, Samokov, Ihtiman, to Verinsko railway station, where they bombed the strategic fuel reservoirs of the VNVV, setting them alight. This was a serious blow to the Bulgarians, as aviation fuel for the largely German origin warplane park was scarce. The Bulgarian fighters could not chase the intruders because of communications failure between the early warning system, which did spot the incoming enemy, and the fighter command post, which did not raise the fighters in time.

3/6. Fighter *Orlyak* was ordered at 13:00 to reconnoitre the *Luftwaffe* airfields at Malo Konyari (west of Prilep), Ibrahimovo (near Skopie), Kumanovo and Niš, with a pair of fighters to each target. The pilots were instructed to attack any enemy aircraft when found. However, they discovered only a Junkers Ju 52 transport on Skopie, which was strafed, and another one on Niš, along with two single-engine aircraft, which were not attacked, however. A third Ju 52 was observed west of Pirot, where it had force landed, while on Pirot airfield an overturned *Stuka* was spotted.

Besides armed reconnaissance missions, four Bf 109Gs provided air cover for *Stukas*, which attacked enemy columns near Shtip. In the afternoon mission, nine Bf 109Gs, also of the 3/6. *Orlyak*, strafed German positions in the Kriva Palanka and Gyueshevo regions, along with obsolete Avia B.534 biplanes. 2/6. *Orlyak* was ordered to move from Karlovo to Vrazhdebna air base next morning.

Similar reconnaissance and escort missions were performed in the next couple of days, while the 13th was a no-fly day, due to bad weather. Combat activity resumed on 14 September, when both Bf 109G-equipped *orlyatsi* (groups) were sent over the front line. The former fighter group strafed a German motorised column south of Zayechar between 14:15-14:45, while the latter targeted enemy positions in the Kriva Palanka area, between 13:45-14:15. Bad weather hindered further activity.

An interesting and very little-known side story of the activity of Bulgarian airmen following the about-face of early September 1944 and the anti-Axis period is the defections. Based on the memoirs of former fighter pilot *Kapitan* Dimităr S. Lazarov, shared with the Author in his Sofia apartment on 22 May 2004, while escorting a Junkers Ju 52/3m transport with Minister without portfolio Dobri Terpeshev – former partisan General – in mid-September 1944, a 2/6. *Orlyak* Bf 109G pilot did not return and was posted missing. Reportedly, he landed in Greece, on a German airfield near Salonika, where he joined his former allies. Indeed, the combat diary of 2/6. *Orlyak* reports for 14 September that “the 8th mission was to escort with two aircraft a Sova (Ju 52/3m transport) to Karlovo and back. Ppor. Aleksandrov was ‘missing in action’”. This entry confirms veteran pilot Lazarov’s account. The defector, *Podporuchik* Vladimir A. Aleksandrov (flying with *Podporuchik* Anton I. Barev as wingman), eventually returned to

147 Curiously, Karlovo was located much farther from the new front lines than Vrazhdebna, where the unit was based earlier. However, this is what the VNVV Combat Diary specifies for 10 September. This must have been a brief temporary situation only, as the diary mentions for the evening of 10 September: “2/6. Fighter *Orlyak*, to move from Karlovo to Vrazhdebna.”

148 Traditional Turkish name (deve means camel, while bair small mountain, hill in Turkish), located at 1167 m altitude. Today it is a border crossing between Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia.



Another photo of a Bf 109G in winter setting. The dedication on the verso was signed by 'Gosho' (nick-name of Georgi) and dated 19 June 1944. Obviously, there is very rarely snow in June, in Bulgaria. Therefore, one must assume that the photo was taken earlier the year, in late winter/early spring. This, in turn, reinforces the fact that the white spiral on the black spinner was introduced on Bulgarian 'Strelas' much earlier than originally thought (in mid-1944). The unusually dark finish of the camouflage scheme, dotted with the peculiar Bulgarian light grey squiggles, is noteworthy.

Bulgaria a couple of weeks later, with a Bf 109G he stole. The solution to this unusual and sketchy story came from a Serbian source, at the 11th hour, which confirms the story pieced together by the Author (see footnote)¹⁴⁹. Aleksandrov claimed that he got lost and landed in German-held territory by mistake. He was pardoned and eventually resumed flying. Not for long, though.

Here is how war veteran Barev recalled post-war that peculiar event: *"On 11 September, Podporuchik Vladimir Aleksandrov and I received order to escort an aircraft to the town of Kavala [located in north-eastern Greece], with two [OF Government] ministers [the Social Democrat Dimităr Neikov and the Communist Dobri Terpeshev, accompanied by one of the leaders of the Bulgarian Communist guerrillas in southern Bulgaria] to negotiate with the Greeks [i.e., representatives of the Communist EAM-ELAS guerrillas] the future of the White Sea region [at that moment still under Bulgarian occupation]. We flew Me-109G, Vlado was the leader, the delegation was in a Ju-52 – a type very secure in the air, but very slow. All went fine, and we landed on Badem Chiflik¹⁵⁰ airfield, near Kavala, where we stayed for 3-4 days. On the way back [on 14 September], we guarded again the delegation, making circles around the Junkers several times till the Rhodope Mountain (the Ju 52 flew at about 150 km/h, while we at about 400 km/h), then we had to leave due to low fuel. I thought that we would reach Plovdiv and then take a left turn at the Maritsa river, to Sofia. But my leader, Aleksandrov, willingly or unwillingly, led me over the whole Rhodope Mountain to the Struma River and instead of turning right to Sofia, he turned left and flew straight south. I had no radio connection and could not warn him that he was wrong. Tried to follow him, but soon quit. I headed towards Sofia. (...). Finally, I landed at Vrazhdebna just in time, as while taxiing towards the parking place, the engine quit due to fuel starvation! During the interrogations that followed, all the time I was tenaciously telling that Vlado lost orientation and that is why he flew south. Not long after, he showed up in a Me-109 with German markings. Coming from the direction of Yugoslavia, he was forced by Soviet fighters to land at a field airfield near Ferdinand (today Montana). He brought us presents – shoes, clothes and other goods – hidden in all possible cavities of the aircraft. He became an instant hero, as he explained to the authorities that he ended up at Germans by navigation error, then gained their confidence telling them that he is a defector. Then, at first chance, he stole a Me-109 from them and flew back."* However, old Bulgarian pilots, who knew Aleksandrov well, thought that he did indeed defect to the Germans, but then when he felt things are getting serious, decided to return with a made-up story. Barev met Aleksandrov again in 2003, when he came to visit Bulgaria, they talked a lot, but he would not reveal whether he flew south intentionally, or really lost orientation.

Aleksandrov would defect once again, this time to the Allies, on 25 June 1946. He took off from Bozhurishte aboard a Yak-9M¹⁵¹ (No. 39, NN 72/7087, c/n 7015387¹⁵²) and landed at Treviso, Italy, along

149 On 2 October 1944, a former Bulgarian pilot, Lt. Vladimir Alexandrov, now flying for the *Luftwaffe*, in 13./SG 151, took off from Kovin airfield, occupied Serbia, and flew eastward, toward Bulgaria, aboard Bf 109G-6, W.Nr. 162194. He was intercepted by a quartet of Soviet La-5 fighters of 31 IAP, and forced to land on Gabrovnitsa airfield (info courtesy of Boris Ciglić).

150 Current Greek name is Amygdaleonas, located in the Kavala district.

151 Confusingly, a note by the 6. *Polk* refers to the aircraft used by the defectors as: „със самолетите си (немско производство) са кацнали на чужда територия” f“with their aircraft (German production) landed on foreign territory”].

152 The meaning of the c/n is: aircraft No. 87 of batch No. 70 from Novosibirsk Plant, Factory No. 153.

with one of his squadron mates, *Poruchik* Nayden P. Stoyanov, who flew Yak-9M, NN 78/7087¹⁵³. Both Bulgarian officers sought political asylum¹⁵⁴.

On 15 September, in the early morning between 06:00-08:30, a Bf 109G *yato* strafed German cars and trucks in the Deve Bair-Kriva Palanka area, "with good results". The ground attack mission was repeated shortly before noon, when a Bf 109G *yato* strafed some lorries, AA artillery batteries and two trains in the Zayechar area. One train was seen burning following the raid. In the afternoon, at 14:05, Bf 109Gs provided top cover for Dornier Do 17s of the 1/5. Bomber *Orlyak*, which attacked a German artillery unit located west of Zagorane.

Based on intelligence reports, both the 2/6. and 3/6. *Orlyatsi* and AA artillery batteries were ordered to be ready to defend Sofia, in anticipation of a *Luftwaffe* air raid against the Bulgarian capital. Accordingly, combat readiness was ordered on 16 September, starting at 10:00, watching for the enemy possibly coming from the direction of Belgrade and Solun. Therefore, no frontline task was assigned to the VNVV's premier fighter groups that day. The 17th Soviet Air Army (17 VA) moved to western Bulgaria from 15 September, and took over command. From then on, air activities had to be synchronised and a new identification (tactical) marking introduced, as detailed later, to avoid 'friendly fire' incidents.

The combat readiness against possible air intruders lasted only one day. On the 17th it was lifted, thus the Bf 109Gs could return over the front line, for the usual armed reconnaissance and escort missions. During the morning mission, which targeted enemy positions in the Bela Palanka-Niš area, two of the eight Bf 109Gs of the 2/6. *Orlyak* failed to return. It turned out that the low-flying Bf 109G of *Kpt.* Marin G. Petrov (former Commanding Officer of the 4/6. *Orlyak*) was shot down by AA fire near Babin Kal (?), at 08:30 (*Strela* NN 172/7057). The aircraft's engine exploded following a direct hit at an altitude of 600-700 m, compelling the pilot to bail out. He landed safely in the Bela Palanka area, being slightly wounded, and could return to his unit. The other missing Bf 109G was flown by *Ppor.* Anton Barev, who had to belly land his aircraft due to fuel starvation.

Starting from 19 September, a new quick identification colour was officially introduced on Bulgarian warplanes, due to the impending co-operation with Soviet aircraft. Order No. I-1332/20.IX.1944, issued by the Headquarters of the Ministry of War, instructed the following: "*For safety purposes during joint operations with the Soviet air force, the following identification markings are to be implemented on Bulgarian aircraft effective the 19th of this month:*

The wingtips are to be painted white, up to 1-meter width,

Propeller spinners are to be painted white,

A 1/2-m wide white stripe is to be painted around the fuselage, in front [sic!] of the combat marking.

The old yellow identification marking to be removed. The new identification marking, described above, to be brought to the attention of [ground] combat units."

Air activity was occasionally hindered not only by the enemy or bad weather, but by the new allies as well. A note dated 18 September mentioned: "*Russian commander demanded all gasoline available on airfields for Russian aircraft.*" Similar reports occasionally turn up in the archives, testimony of a less than flawless co-operation between the new allies.

Combat losses were not always fatal, often it meant that the airframe was punctured, sometime the engine hit, but the aircraft could eventually return to the home base. This was the case of two *Strelas*, both damaged by enemy ground fire while attacking at low level Gevgeliya and Sehovo (Idoméni, Greece) railway stations, at 14:35. Both aircraft returned home safely, along with an *Uragan* (Do 17), also hit during the same mission performed on 20 September. Similar light damage was inflicted upon three Bf 109Gs the next day, during the early morning reconnaissance/bombing mission in the Prilep area, performed by three *Uragans*, escorted by a dozen Bf 109Gs and D.520s.

However, one of the combat losses suffered the next day, the 22nd, turned to be fatal. Starting at 06:00, armed reconnaissance was performed by a pair of fighters, which were tasked to attack any enemy target they may find. Such aggressive combat missions, usually performed by a '*dvoyka*', were repeated at 11:00 and 14:00. During the afternoon mission, the Bf 109G-6, No. 163, flown by *Podporuchik* Dimităr D. Sotirov of 3/6. *Orlyak*, was hit by AA fire near Izvor (Prilep area), at 15:00. Both the pilot and his aircraft were posted as missing. Later on, Bulgarian troops located the crash-landed aircraft southwest of Veles, which apparently exploded upon impact, and the body of the unfortunate pilot. Another Bf 109G-6 of the 3/6. *Orlyak*, the one flown by *Podporuchik* Pavel E. Pavlov, was also damaged by enemy fire. According to the 3/6. *Orlyak*'s combat diary, the *Strela* was hit only in the landing gear hydraulics, so it stayed in flyable condition. The pilot wanted to complete his combat sortie, only after did he return to Bozhurishte airfield, where he carefully belly-landed.

153 Both aircraft were powered by a Klimov M-105PF engine of 1,260 HP output (c/n 435-715 and 529-43). Both airframes were officially written off on 26 August 1946, along with their engines.

154 Aleksandrov eventually ended up in South America, while his defector comrade, Stoyanov – not identical to the top-scoring 'ace' pilot with the same surname – in Australia. Aleksandrov returned to Bulgaria to see his former colleagues in the 2000s.



The same day, *Poruchik* Petăr Manolev, who had just returned to his unit after being wounded in combat on 17 August while fighting the Americans, performed his first combat mission of the anti-German campaign. One reconnaissance sortie was flown aboard Bf 109G-6, No. 1, in the morning, from 8:15 to 9:10, while a longer air escort sortie was logged between 13:55 and 15:30, aboard aircraft No. 6.

An entry in the VNVV combat diary records for 22 September that two unidentified enemy aircraft attacked Vrazhdebna airfield from high altitude, dropping 23 small calibre bombs. The projectiles hit the dispensary, the western corner of the hangar and the centre of the runway. Four Bulgarian soldiers from 2/6. *Orlyak* were wounded. The Soviets suffered three dead (one of them was the deputy C/O of 244. BAD, Lt. Col. Ivan I. Malov), and 23 wounded, plus two destroyed aircraft. The intruders got away.

The summary of 23 September mentions that of the 43 combat aircraft, which performed a total of 14 missions, three were damaged – two seriously – but all could return to their home bases. Unfortunately, no information is given on the type of warplanes (it's known that D.520s were damaged that day).

The VNVV's Air *Eskadra* (Division) ordered one fighter *dvoyka* (pair) to move to Vărba airfield (Radomir) the next morning, where they had to be put on combat readiness against enemy airplanes in case they would penetrate the area. The move was well timed, as at 17:00, the airfield was bombed by a lone German Ju 88 (it dropped 26 bombs, all fell away from the target). The high-flying intruder could not be caught.

A report by the Air *Eskadra*, summing up the order of battle of the VNVV combat units for 26 September, includes the following fighter units:

- 2/6. Fighter *Orlyak* at Vrazhdebna, with 22 pilots (15 officers and 7 NCOs),
- 3/6. Fighter *Orlyak* at Bozhurishte, with 21 pilots (11 officers, 10 NCOs).

In total, 30 Bf 109Gs were combat ready that day, while 69 were unserviceable, totalling 99 aircraft.

After a no-fly day due to bad weather, combat activity resumed on 28 September. That autumn day saw a record number of combat missions flown by fighter aircraft: 15. All of them were performed by *dvoynkas* (pairs), which were ordered to attack any suitable ground target they could spot during armed combat reconnaissance missions. In such a low-level attack the Bf 109G-6 flown by *Podporuchik* Gencho D. Ivanov of 3/6. *Orlyak*, was hit, in the Zayechar area. The injured pilot performed a successful emergency landing one km north of Kula village. The same day Bf 109G-6, No. 172/7057, was officially written off, which might be linked to the aforementioned incident. Indeed, no matter the experience gained in combatting enemy fighters and bombers, often at close range, there was no escape from the occasional anti-aircraft fire while flying at low level, as fighter aircraft – particularly those powered by liquid cooled engine, like the Bf 109G – were vulnerable to ground fire. This was valid for aircraft and airmen of all nations. No wonder most fighter pilots dreaded such low-level attacks, when survival often hinged on no more than sheer luck.

Beautiful in-flight shot of 'White 7', taken above the Stara Planina Mountain (in the area around Karlovo-Trojan), in the spring of 1945. The unidentified light grey colour covering the port wing can be observed on several other photos of Bf 109Gs and D.520s photographed in 1944.

Bad weather largely hindered combat activity over the Macedonian front in the next few days¹⁵⁵. The fighters performed occasional reconnaissance sorties, weather permitting, without any noticeable outcome.

Weather improved significantly on 5 October, allowing the VNVV combat unit to be active the whole day. The fighters performed recce flights by individual aircraft. They also escorted level and dive bombers, and attacked enemy trucks and positions. During such a low-level strafing, performed at 15:15, Bf 109G-6, No. 175¹⁵⁶, flown by eight-point 'ace' pilot, *Poruchik* Nedëlcho D. Bonchev, commanding officer of the 652. *Yato*, was hit by ground fire at Rankovtsi, 19 km west of Kriva Palanka, over German-held territory. The combat diary of 2/6. *Orlyak* mentions for that day that "during the 24th combat mission of the group, eight aircraft performed bomber escort, followed by strafing attack on enemy vehicles spotted on the road linking Kriva Palanka and Kumanovo. Enemy flak protecting the German column shot down the aircraft of Por. Nedëlcho Bonchev at Stratsin. The pilot jumped out with his parachute"¹⁵⁷. What happened to the pilot after he landed is not known, there is no word in the combat diary of his fate. The crew of a Do 17M of 1/5. Bomber *Orlyak* spotted a burning *Strela* near Psacha (15 km E of Stratsin).

Unofficial Bulgarian sources mention that upon landing Bonchev hurt his leg and could not escape capture by the Germans. He was last seen by another captive Bulgarian Bf 109 pilot, Por. Georgi Georgiev, called 'Gosheto', who had also been taken prisoner by the Germans a couple of weeks later. He saw Bonchev, wounded in his leg, at the entrance of the POW camp in Skopie, unable to exchange a single word with him, however. There are several assumptions of his eventual fate: either he was killed en-route to the POW camp in Priština, or he was executed by the Germans for undisclosed reasons. In fact, Nedëlcho Bonchev was (posthumously) promoted to the rank of Captain on 1 January 1945, and he is officially listed as "died in German captivity". For the fallen, death was always instant; official rewards arrived only later on, if ever.

The same day, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, another Bf 109G-6, No. 162, flown by *Podporuchik* Petăr A. Bochev of 3/6. *Orlyak* – the second highest scoring 'ace' pilot with 13 points, amounting to three confirmed and four damaged enemy aircraft – was also hit by anti-aircraft fire in the Kriva Palanka-Kumanovo area. The '109 was set alight, and the pilot had to force land with the flaming aircraft 2 km north of Psacha (10 km west of Kriva Palanka), in German-held territory. One version is that after crash landing he escaped, then changed sides and joined the Germans¹⁵⁸. However, the official version is that he died in his aircraft, which exploded moments after the force landing¹⁵⁹. In fact, the date of his death is officially recorded as 5 October 1944. High-scoring 'ace' Bochev, his low-flying aircraft victim of indiscriminate ground fire he could not possibly avoid, was elevated (posthumously) to the next higher rank of *Poruchik* on 25 December 1944.

Bochev's family knows a different version¹⁶⁰. Through oral history, they know that after Bochev disappeared, his father went to the area to claim his body. However, it took well over a month until he received a metal coffin welded shut. No one from the family saw his remains. While Bochev sr. was waiting, he received news that his son actually survived and spoke on the German-sponsored 'Radio Donau', which was heard by a family member. A shepherd boy his father talked to mentioned that he saw an aircraft in flames that landed, and the pilot escaped alive. No further information ever arrived from Bulgarian officials. However, in the late 1940s, Bochev's family was raided, several times, by the state police. They suspected that Bochev – who thus can be presumed to have survived the war – was trying to arrange for his family to escape the Communist-run Bulgaria and flee to the USA. The truth can be found only by researching the former Bulgarian State Security archives.

A third Bf 109G was also hit by ground fire that fateful day, the darkest one for Bulgarian fighter pilots in the anti-German campaign, but this time the damage was superficial. Upon returning from combat, Bf 109G-2, No. 27 (pilot *Kandidat podofitser* Stoyan Dachev of 2/6. *Orlyak*), and Ju 87D-5, No. 21, overturned while landing on the waterlogged airfield; all crews were OK.

155 Despite bad weather, a Soviet A-20 'Boston' bomber, piloted by Lt. B. Plechanov of 449 BAP, was shot down by *Luftwaffe* fighters over Pirdop on 26.09. The 'Boston B-3'-equipped 244 BAD (449 BAP belonged to) reported four combat losses in September.

156 Bf 109G-6, NN 175/7057, was written off on 6.10.1944, along with the DB 605A-1 engine, W.Nr. 36387.

157 This was the second time Bonchev had to bail out. The first occasion was during the ill-fated 'Black Easter' of 17 April 1944.

158 The possibility mentioned by a secondary Russian source – obviously not in line with the official version – that Bochev joined a Bulgarian SS unit called *Bulgarisches SS-Regiment Nr. 1* (or *Bulgarisches Waffen-Grenadier Regiment der SS*) and piloted a Fieseler Fi 156 *Storch* light liaison aircraft until going missing in the morning of 6 May 1945 in the vicinity of Stockerau, north-west of Vienna, Austria, is unequivocally false. Neither the Bulgarian SS, nor the German IInd SS *Panzer Corps* the Bulgarians were supposed to fight along with, was ever involved in combat in Stockerau in early May 1945.

159 Veteran fighter pilot Veselin Tenev recalls that Bochev's father went to the crash place to search for the remains of his son; however, he found nothing, only a single collar tab.

160 Thanks to Ms. Dobrinka Boneva for the details.



On 6 October, VNVV headquarters ordered an unspecified fighter 'dvoyka' to destroy a Luftwaffe Henschel Hs 126 reconnaissance aircraft spotted on Vrba airfield, Serbia¹⁶¹. Although the aircraft type, or unit, is not mentioned, most probably the order referred to the *Strela*, the most potent fighter aircraft VNVV could muster in 1944. There is no word on the outcome of this 'find-and-kill' mission; however, the easy-to-spot ground target was no match to experienced fighter pilots. Next day, *Strelas* provided top cover for *Shtukas* that attacked targets between Skopie and Kumanovo.

Between 9 September and 7 October, the three VNVV fighter groups (the D.520-equipped one included) performed a total of 449 combat sorties, including 137 reconnaissance and 48 ground attacks. The following day, an overall offensive was commenced by the Bulgarian Army, in co-operation with the Red Army, on the whole Yugoslavian front. Combat aircraft took a central part in the offensive.

For the 8th of October, the combat diary of VNVV Air *Eskadra* laconically reports:

"1. The 1/2. *Shtuka* Orlyak with 21 aircraft, covered by 9 Me 109 of 3/6. Fighter Orlyak, attacked the following objects:

- At 08:10, four aircraft bombed the bridge over Pchinya River,
- At 08:20, three aircraft bombed the bridge north of Kumanovo,
- At 08:05, three aircraft bombed the bridge near Zlokuchane (7 km west of Skopie) and attacked a train at Skopie railway station,
- At 08:20, the same three aircraft attacked two other trains spotted between Skopie and Kumanovo,
- At 08:20, seven aircraft bombed the bridge over Kriva River, west of Kriva Palanka.

(...)

3. The 2/6. Fighter Orlyak with one krilo of 4 aircraft joined returning aircraft, and provided air cover for them (presumably, the fighters of 3/6. Orlyak stayed over the front line to strafe targets of opportunity).

(...)

5. This day, four aircraft (of undisclosed type) were damaged by AA fire, but all were able to return to their bases. All crews are OK."

Next day, the following entry can be found in the aforementioned combat diary: "The 1/2. *Shtuka* Orlyak with 15 aircraft, covered by eight fighters of 3/6. Fighter Orlyak, bombed a factory building 3 km west of Surdulitsa, AA batteries and trenches west of the factory, and artillery positions south-west of the factory. One aircraft was slightly damaged by AA fire, no loss."

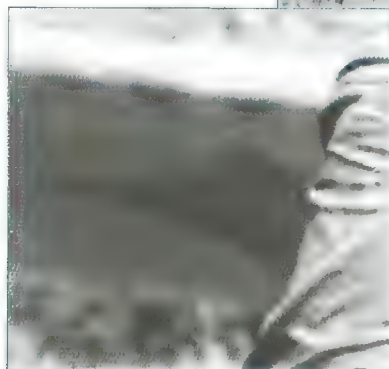
The last page of the hand-written combat diary of the Air *Eskadra* available to the Author covers the events of 10 October 1944. That day, no specific fighter activity was expressly mentioned; however, they must have provided the usual top cover for bombers, probably without any incident worth mentioning. Therefore, from this date on, only the events that involved damage, or loss of aircraft are covered.

About 16 Bf 109G-2/G-6s (the equipment of a complete yato, or squadron, i.e., 12+4 aircraft) are lined up for a parade on the grass of Bozhurishte airfield, in mid-1945. All have their spinners neatly painted in white, the Allied (i.e., allied to the Soviets) recognition colour; thus the last reminiscence of Luftwaffe recognition, white spiral on black spinner, disappeared for good. All 'Strelas' sport – except for the fifth aircraft from the camera – white rear fuselage band, also pro-Allies identification symbols along with similarly painted wingtips. Curiously, none of the fighters appear to have individual coloured number on their fuselage, which is uncommon at this time period.

¹⁶¹ The Hs 126 was most probably part of *Nahaufklärungsstaffel Kroatien*, at that time supporting the short-lived *Armeeabteilung Serbien* (Army Group Serbia). In October, the unit had four Hs 126s (down from six the previous month).

Extraordinary photo of Bulgarian airmen lined up for a memory shot in front of one of the so-called 'trophy' Bf 109Gs found in Austria, at Zeltweg airfield, in mid-1945. Notice what appears to be a four-point (red?) star on the starboard wing undersurface, which covers a painted-over roundel.

Similar markings were observed by the British based at Zeltweg (see report of the RAF Field Intelligence Unit, Zeltweg, found in footnote 172). Unfortunately, none of the depicted eight men could be identified.



Detail of the peculiar underwing marking.

The 11th of October saw a reduction in air combat activity compared to the previous intense days. Nonetheless, a combat loss was still recorded by the Bulgarian side, when Bf 109G-6, No. 144 (other source says No. 177), had to force land at Kyustendil, due damage inflicted to the engine by ground fire. The 3/6. *Orlyak* pilot, *Por.* Boris [in the document Borislav] V. Damev, escaped unhurt. On the 16th, *Strelas* provided top cover for *Uragan* bombers that attacked targets between Skopie and Kumanovo. Next day, a fighter *chetvorka* (foursome) took off, led by *Ppor.* Todor Rozev, to escort *Shtukas*. The target was their erstwhile air base, Skopie airfield.

Based on the published memoirs of former Bulgarian *Strela* pilot *Podporuchik* Todor Rozev, a pair of underwing gondolas (2-cm cannon) was tested during ground attacks, and the result was excellent. Rozev mentions one such case that happened on 10 October, when he performed a *Stuka* escort mission together with 'Toshko' Hristov. He fired with the cannon mounted in underwing gondolas, and was very pleased with the effect observed on ground targets. However, this auxiliary equipment (*Rüstsatz*) was used only sporadically, probably due to shortage of parts and ammunition (was not used against the USAAF).

On 23 October, 41 VNVV warplanes performed combat missions in support of the Bulgarian 1st Army in the Stratsin-Kumanovo area, between 10:30 and 15:15. Of these, a dozen were fighters – most probably Bf 109Gs. Four *Strelas* of 2/6. *Orlyak* performed the 41st combat mission, free hunting and strafing enemy targets. They jumped on a vehicle column spotted on the road linking Kriva Palanka and Kumanovo, destroying several targets. It was during this dangerous low-level attack near Kumanovo railway station when ground fire hit the '109 piloted by *Poruchik* Kiril S. Andonov¹⁶², which crashed in flames in the vicinity of Kumanovo, killing the unfortunate airman. He was promoted posthumously to the rank of *Kapitan* on 1 January 1945. One of his colleagues, *Podporuchik* Georgi P. Georgiev¹⁶³, was also hit, but was luckier, as he managed to crash land between Kumanovo and Stratsin and escaped alive. However, his joy was short lived, as he ended up prisoner to the Germans within minutes. Unlike his other colleague mentioned earlier, Nedëlcho Bonchev, Georgiev survived German internment and eventually managed to return to Bulgaria. In an original period document summing up the results of the anti-German campaign (from 9 Sept. to 30 Nov.), *Podpor.* Georgiev is still listed as 'missing in action' (he was one of the three MIA airmen, the other Bf 109G pilot being *Por.* Bonchev, while the third one

162 An original VNVV aircrew loss list of the anti-German campaign gives his last name as Antonov. However, the list of Bulgarian fighter pilots published by Rumen Rumenin in his book, 'American Terrorism over Bulgaria' (Zhar Ptitsa, Sofia, 2004), usually very accurate, mentions him as Andonov. The same version of the name is also given in a list of fallen airmen.

163 To illustrate how difficult is to 'navigate' for a non-Bulgarian (and not only) among Bulgarian names, there were at least four fighter pilots with the name Georgi Georgiev, only their middle names – often omitted in documents – being different. Moreover, the military rank of all of them was the same: *Podporuchik*. Based on an original VNVV aircrew loss document, the middle name of 'our man' was Petkov, and was member of the 2/6. *Orlyak*.



Two photos depicting a belly landed 'trophy' (ex-German) Bf 109G, in the early summer of 1945. The aircraft had to be force landed en-route from Austria to Bulgaria, via Pécs (Hungary), due to engine sabotage by its former owners. It appears to be a factory fresh aircraft, with the fuselage still unpainted, except for the tail section and cockpit frame, which arrived from sub-contractors readily painted. The wings have some sort of camouflage paint as well. The rudder appears to be a dark colour, possibly yellow, late war Luftflotte 4 regulations. There are no markings, or any identification, visible, except for the small, hand written black number 9 behind the cockpit.



D.520 pilot *k.p.* Petkov). Neither serial number of the two Bf 109Gs lost that day is known. However, two Bf 109Gs were officially written off on 24 October, Nos. 100 and 156; these might very well be the two aircraft in question.

On 1 November, a total of 79 Bf 109Gs existed in the VNVV inventory, of which 59 were under repair and only 20 being combat ready, with a total of 1,321 hours of engine resources available. Indeed, the Bulgarian air force was in a precarious state. Besides warplanes, there was overall shortage of weapons, ammunition, high-grade aviation fuel and spare parts (initially, in early September, the Red Army took over all military warehouses with spare parts and supplies as war booty). For example, on 4 November, it was officially estimated that the air force could function up to only two weeks more due of the aforementioned shortages. To replace attrition and the existing German matériel, which became increasingly unserviceable due to lack of spare parts, the VNVV HQ requested from the HQ of the Soviet 17th Air Army stationed in Bulgaria the urgent delivery of 90 Soviet fighter types, namely Yakovlev Yak-3, or Yak-9, and a few dual-control Yak-7UTI. However, the request was turned down by Moscow. The Bulgarians had to carry on the war with what they had at hand.

Three *Strelya dvoykas* logged combat missions in the afternoon on 4 November. Two pairs, forming a *chetvorka*, performed reconnaissance between 14:35 and 15:50 in the area delimited by Kumanovo – Aleksandrovo railway station – Pchinya River. Half an hour later, a Bf 109G pair escorted a Dornier Do 17M *Uragan* of the 73rd Reconnaissance *Yato*. The mission had to be cut short due to unfavourable weather, so the fighters landed back at base at 16:20.

The next combat loss of the VNVV occurred on 6 November, when *Feldfebel* Kiril I. Kălvachev of 2/6. *Orlyak* failed to return from a combat sortie. No further details are known of his demise. He is listed in an official VNVV report of lost airmen as 'killed in action'. However, he must have returned at one point, as his name appears in a report dated 11 April 1945, when he lost his life in an in-flight accident.

On 12 November, six Bf 109G-6s of 2/6. *Orlyak* performed the fighter group's 53th combat mission. The target was enemy positions in the Skopie-Mitrovitsa area, as well as airfields around Priština. There



Still scene at Pécs airfield (southern Hungary), taken on 1 June 1945, featuring a Junkers Ju 52/3m transport (LZ-UNM, No. 5) in the foreground and several 'trophy' Bf 109Gs in the background. Unfortunately, the distance to these 'Gustavs' is too big to be able to discern any meaningful details, except that all former military markings (but not the yellow Axis recognition colour) had been overpainted.

The monumental building in the background is the Hadapródiskola (School of Military Cadets). From 1956, the airfield and surrounding areas had been populated with tall buildings that make up the so-called Uránváros (Uranium City); therefore, a 'then-and-now' style photo the Author wanted to do is impossible to make.

were about ten Focke-Wulf Fw 190s spotted on one of the airfields¹⁶⁴, which was heavily defended by flak, especially the southern and the western parts. Despite this, a pair of daring Bulgarians proceeded to strafing the landing ground, reporting two enemy aircraft destroyed after the low-level run.

The sister 3/6. *Orlyak* was also active that day. At 10:25, all dozen airworthy *Strelas* took off, led by *Kpt.* Atanasov, to attack an airfield near Prishtina. As soon as the marauders approached the target, heavy anti-aircraft fire met them. They descended to treetop level, flew around and approached for attack from the SSE direction. At the outskirts of the airfield, around 17 German aircraft of various types were scattered. The *chetvorka* from the 692. *Yato*, led by *Ofitserski kandidat* Gruev, gave top cover, while the *orlyak shtab chetvorka* attacked. *Kapitan* Atanasov reportedly destroyed one Ju 88 bomber. *Podofitser* Somov shot at a Fieseler Fi 156 *Storch*, a Bücker trainer and an unidentified biplane. *Feldfebel* Konzov strafed a Ju 52/3m transport and another biplane. *Podofitser* Koledov attacked flak artillery positions and also fired at a Fieseler *Storch* and a biplane. From the *troyka* of the 682. *Yato*, *Poruchik* Manolev attacked a Ju 52/3m and a Fieseler *Storch*, *Podporuchik* Banov another Ju 52/3m, while *Podporuchik* Kolev hit a third Ju 52/3m and a biplane. According to German sources, only a Fi 156 and a Hs 126 were actually damaged on Obilich airfield (NW of Prishtina), none was destroyed.

After the attack, the *orlyak* retreated at treetop level. Once clearing the area, the raiders gained height and proceeded in a homeward direction. A few minutes later, *Kpt.* Atanasov announced on the radio that he had spotted a train and descended to strafe it. Then he banked and disappeared from his colleagues' sight. The other three pilots carried on without him. Flying again at treetop level, they fired at motor vehicles caught on the road. During strafing, *Feldfebel* Konzov was lost from sight, so the rest flew back to Bozhurishte without him. At Vrania, they heard on the radio *Kpt.* Atanasov saying: *I am being attacked!* Indeed, while strafing the train over Uroshevats, Atanasov was jumped by two fighters he identified as 'Mustangs', which separated from a flight of four. Thanks to his flying skills, he managed to evade them, but still ended up with several bullet holes in his *Strelas* airframe. It turned out that the attackers were actually 'Spitfires' from 94th Squadron (RAF), which later claimed a Bf 109G damaged, with the note in effect that the target might have been a Bulgarian machine. Luckily, this unique "friendly fire" incident ended without loss.

The final combat loss of Bulgarian Bf 109Gs during World War Two happened on 18 November. That day, seven Bf 109Gs of 2/6. *Orlyak* (erroneously given in the combat diary as 1/6. *Orlyak*), joined by a *chetvorka* from 3/6. *Orlyak*, jointly led by group commander *Kpt.* Asen D. Kovachev, strafed Miloševo airfield (located 8 km NW of Priština). Two of the attackers were hit by anti-aircraft fire. Upon being hit, *Podporuchik* Spas [in the document Slav] M. Konstantinov turned his burning Bf 109G-6, No. 125/7057, on its back and jumped out. He was last seen as landing NW of Priština. However, reportedly, the pilot was captured, then executed by the Germans. The unfortunate Konstantinov was the last Bulgarian fighter pilot combat victim of World War Two¹⁶⁵. The flight leader's aircraft was also hit by anti-aircraft fire in the tail; however, he managed to return safely to the home airfield.

¹⁶⁴ Based on a *Luftwaffe* Order of Battle dated 24.09.1944, Stab II./SG 10 and the second *Staffel* of SG 10, equipped with Fw 190F/Gs, were based on 'Skoplje' airfield, where they retreated from Greece. The other *Staffel* of II./SG 10 was still located on Mega airfield, near Saloniki (Thessaloniki), Greece. On 6 November, II./SG 10 reported 4 Fw 190s on Skopie a/f.

¹⁶⁵ A document dated 20.12.1944 mentions the following: "*Poruchik* Kiril Stoyanov, *krilo* commander, leader of a *chetvorka* (foursome air formation), was killed while strafing enemy vehicles on the road between Stratsin and Kumanovo". However, at this late date there was no combat activity any more performed by Bulgarian *Strelas*; therefore, the date must be wrong. By checking the cases of Bulgarian fighter pilots killed in action in similar circumstances the author firmly believes the described scene covers the demise of *Poruchik* Kiril Stoilov Andonov, in the Kumanovo area, on 23.10.1944.



Quite interestingly, there is evidence of this incident from the receiving end. A German document mentions for 18 November that out of the seven Bulgarian Bf 109s that attacked the *Wehrmacht* infantry unit LXXXXI A.K. *zbu/la* at Vucitrn (actually Vučitrn or Vushtrri, located in the northern part of Kosovo) two were shot down by *Obermaat Kuhlmann* of 3. *Kp. Marine-Bordflak-Abt. 31* (3rd Company of the 31st Navy On-Board Flak Artillery Division). The number of spotted enemy aircraft matches Bulgarian records, and two targets were indeed hit, one fatally, as noted above.

Next day, one of the last combat missions was performed by eight *Strelas* of 2/6. and 3/6. *Orlyatsi*. They escorted *Stukas* to a target near Priština. During the subsequent low-level attack on a train spotted in Priluzje station, flak fire ripped a 50 cm hole in the wing of *Por. Damev's Strela*, large enough for him to poke his head through upon returning to home base.

Further Bf 109Gs were written off during the month of November, more precisely on the 21st, as follows: Nos. 77, 82, 90, 93, 106, 107, 118, 125. Certainly, the aforementioned combat losses are included in this range; however, it's impossible to identify which ones were they. These were the last *Strela* write-offs of the year.

On 23 November 1944, the Bulgarian air force delivered its last strike against German ground units. That day, between 15:40 and 16:25, six Do 17M bombers, escorted by 12 Bf 109Gs of 3/6. *Orlyak*, targeted an enemy column spotted between Mitrovica and Raška, in northern Kosovo (location over 300 km west from their air base). Reportedly, 20 vehicles were destroyed in the bombing raid and strafing. With this mission, the combat activity of the VNVV during World War Two practically ended. Next day, the combat units were ordered to retreat to their winter bases and place themselves on a peacetime footing (except for the 73rd Long-range Reconnaissance Squadron, which was active until 5 December 1944)¹⁶⁶.

During the so-called 'Patriotic War' that lasted two and a half months, the 6. *Iztrebitelen Polk* (6th Fighter Regiment) reported a total of 793 combat sorties performed (of which 191 were by 2/6. *Orlyak* and 373 by 3/6. *Orlyak*), which amounts to 29% of all combat sorties logged by the VNVV. Nine Bf 109Gs (and seven D.520s), and a total of seven pilots were lost (data for the D.520-equipped *orlyak* included) – all victims to enemy ground fire and accidents. Some 120 vehicles, three tanks, 10 artillery tractors, two tankers, two locomotives and two light-calibre anti-aircraft batteries were reportedly neutralised. In addition, the Bulgarian fighter pilots claimed 14 enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground by strafing (most of the ground victory claims are unsubstantiated).

MAAF Intelligence Report, dated 18 December 1944¹⁶⁷, gives the following information (for the September-November 1944 period), obviously based on official Bulgarian sources: "the fighters of Major *Knustyu Atanasov* carried out 793 flights fulfilling 147 battle tasks, of which 68 were escort, 44 *recce* and 37 ground attacks (*sic!*). In low level ground attack they destroyed 15 enemy aircraft, 115 cars, 10 armoured tractors, 2 light anti-aircraft batteries, 2 locomotives, 20 wagons, 1 oil wagon and 1 petrol dump".

Luckily, the photographer walked a short distance, and took another shot of the same Bf 109G line-up. Further details are revealed, including differently painted spinners and what appears to be overpainted roundel (or star) on the starboard wing undersurface. Most of the 'Gustavs' feature enhanced visibility cockpit canopy and tall tail, but the tailwheels are either the classic short, or the new long version.

¹⁶⁶ Transport/courier flights were occasionally performed by the VNVV until May 1945, and beyond.

¹⁶⁷ M.A.A.F. Intelligence, Air Section, A.C.C. Bulgaria, British Mission, Ref.: ACC/1/INT, found on MAAF Microfilm Roll 238, USAF HRA.

'Trophy' aircraft were transported to Bulgaria by train as well. Reportedly, the first 22 captured Bf 109Gs were loaded onto trains and sent home through Yugoslavia. These two shots depict captured ex-Luftwaffe

Bf 109Gs loaded onto railway wagons, arriving in Bulgaria in mid-1945.

Apparently, not only the aircraft, but the wagons were 'trophy' as well, formerly belonging to the Hungarian State Railways, MÁV (s/n S 402793). The original note in Hungarian "Éu. műhely tulajdona", i.e., 'Property of Éu. workshop', was simply disregarded by the victors and the wagon requisitioned.

Highly interesting is the fuselage marking visible on one of the 'trophy' Bf 109Gs, 5F+16, which identifies it as former NAGr. 14 (Nahaufklärergroupe, or Short-range Reconnaissance Group 14) aircraft. Coincidentally, in late July 1945, British forces found on Zeltweg airfield – the same field the Bulgarians had removed most of their 'trophy aircraft from – an identically marked (!) '109, which they identified as 'Me 109 G-10/U4, W.Nr. 611987, 16+5F' (ex-NAG 14), fitted with a DB 605 engine, W.Nr. 1701014.



At the end of the combat activity of the anti-German war, only 125 VNVV warplanes remained serviceable, of which 25 were Bf 109Gs. The evolution of the serviceable aircraft of the two Bf 109G-equipped fighter groups can be followed in the tables below:

Number of serviceable Bf 109Gs of 2/6. *Orlyak* (September-December 1944)

| Date | 1.09 | 17.09 | 26.09 | 1.10 | 7.10 | 15.10 | 30.10 | 1.11 | 15.11 | 20.11 | 30.11 | 1.12 |
|------|------|-------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| No. | 16 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 10 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 9 | 12 | 13 | 13 |

Number of serviceable Bf 109Gs of 3/6. *Orlyak* (September-December 1944)

| Date | 1.09 | 17.09 | 26.09 | 1.10 | 7.10 | 15.10 | 30.10 | 1.11 | 9.11 | 12.11 | 15.11 | 20.11 | 30.11 | 1.12 |
|------|------|-------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| No. | 18 | 16 | 9 | 13 | 11 | 13 | 13 | 13 | 11 | 12 | 11 | 11 | 12 | 12 |

Once combat activities ceased, the Bulgarian warplanes were recalled to their air bases in the mainland (for the Bf 109Gs it was Bozhurishte, near Sofia). This relocation was completed by the end of November. On the last day of the month, a total of 25 serviceable Bf 109Gs were listed in the VNVV's Order of Battle. Their task was protection of the capital and surroundings in the event of an enemy air strike. However, such intrusion became more and more unlikely, as the *Luftwaffe* was busy retreating from the Balkans towards Axis territory as intact as possible.

1945 – The Year of Changes

The New Year found the Bulgarian air force on a peacetime footing. On the first day of the year, the number of existing first-line Bf 109Gs was 65, of which 16 were serviceable and 18 unserviceable with the 2/6. *Orlyak*, while 3/6. *Orlyak* reported 14 serviceable and 17 unserviceable *Gustavs* in its roster. Order of Battle dated 1 April 1945 lists 2/6. *Orlyak* as located at Bozhurishte, while 3/6. *Orlyak* at Karlovo. From there, the latter *orlyak* moved to Sliven in mid-June. This relocation is witnessed by logbook entries of several *Strela* pilots (see on-line content for details, link on page 112).

With the front line far away from Bulgaria proper, and the Bulgarian warplanes – except for the occasional long-range reconnaissance and transport flights – not requested to support Bulgarian ground troops fighting in Hungary by then, the air force units performed peacetime activity. This consisted of training, transport, liaison flights, mixed with the occasional patrols in the border regions. Air interdiction was of high importance, as over 100 intrusions in Bulgarian airspace were recorded during an unspecified 39 days in the first half of 1945 alone.

Only one notable incident that involved Bf 109Gs is recorded for 1945. It was a deadly mid-air collision between two *Strelas*, Nos. 102 and 166, that happened during a training flight on 11 April 1945, at 10:50. Both aircraft crashed at Gurmazovo, 2 km from Bozhurishte air base, killing the pilots, *Ofitserski kandidat* Ivan T. Zlatarev and *Urednik* Kiril I. Kălvachev of 2/6. *Orlyak*. The latter, a much more experienced pilot, managed to bail out of his doomed aircraft at 300 m; however, he hit the vertical stabilizer, the buckle securing his parachute opened and the chute separated from the unfortunate pilot, who thus fell to his death. They became the last Bf 109 pilot victims during wartime, even if their death was not related to combat activity.

Order of Battle of 2/6. *Orlyak* (April 1945)

Headquarters: Bozhurishte

Orlyak Commanding Officer: *Kapitan* Asen D. Kovachev

642. *Yato* Commanding Officer: *Poruchik* Kiril I. Kiranov

652. *Yato* Commanding Officer: *Kapitan* Boris K. Teofilov

662. *Yato* Commanding Officer: *Poruchik* Lyuben Y. Milenkov

Aircraft available: 19 serviceable and 9 unserviceable Bf 109Gs

At least one other lethal accident claimed the life of a *Strela* pilot, although the aircraft he flew was a trainer. It was the one air victory point owner *Feldfebel* Nikola Hristov Kralichev of 3/6. *Orlyak* who perished during a training flight aboard a locally-built DAR-9 *Siniger* biplane. He and a student pilot, the 19-year-old Simeon Stefanov Simeonov, took off from Kazanlăk airfield on 2 April 1945 for a routine flight. However, they buzzed an unidentified ground object and hit a tree near Sheynovo village, about 10 km NNW from the base. The aircraft crashed, killing the undisciplined fighter pilot turned trainer, and severely wounding the young student pilot¹⁶⁸.

Non-lethal accidents happened more often, however. For example, on 29 March 1945 (another document mentions the event as happened on the 19th), *Strela* No. 27, with *Podofitser* Stoyan I. Dachev from 2/6. *Orlyak* at the controls, collided with *Strela* No. 142 parked on Bozhurishte airfield. The latter aircraft had to be written off. The careless pilot was jailed for 30 days, the 642. *Yato* commander, *Por.* Kiril I. Kiranov, for 10 days. Another accident happened on 22 May 1945, when war veteran *Por.* Evgheni G. Tonchev of 3/6. *Orlyak* belied his mount, No. 170/7057, on Karlovo airfield. Both he and the commander of 692. *Yato*, *Kpt.* Boris V. Damev, were reprimanded. Eleven days later, it was the turn of *Strela* No. 128/7057 to be damaged, also on Karlovo airfield, by *Ppor.* Mihail T. Uzunov, also member of 3/6. *Orlyak*, but 672. *Yato*. On another occasion, *Por.* Nikola V. Nikolov of 3/6. *Orlyak* belly landed his '109G, No. 109/7057, on Sliven airfield on 14 June 1945, slightly damaging it.

With Bulgaria now firmly within Soviet influence, the stringent need to re-equip the air force was at the whim of Moscow. Bulgarian leaders had already tried to acquire Soviet technology in late 1944, without success. Their effort eventually bore fruit, however. On 16 March 1945, Bulgaria – officially still a Kingdom, until September 1946 – and the USSR signed a military agreement, which stipulated, among other things, the handover of 120 Yakovlev Yak-9 fighters of various models, as well as two Yak-9V two-seat trainers (a service manual mentions Yak-7). In addition, personnel drawn from several fighter squadrons transferred to the occupied Pécs airfield, in southern Hungary, to train flying Soviet Lavochkin La-5 fighters. A reinforced and enlarged ad-hoc squadron of 2/6. *Orlyak*, called 642. *Yato*, made up of 20 vol-

¹⁶⁸ The young trainee who cheated death, who was barely resuscitated at the local hospital, eventually became *Polk. Gen.* Simeon S. Simeonov, Commander of the Bulgarian Air Defence and Air Force from 1973 to 1975.



Kapitan Asen D. Kovachev was a prominent fighter pilot, yato commander in 2/6. Orlyak. First, he flew the D.520, then switched to the Bf 109G. In late April 1944, was appointed commander of 2/6. Orlyak. Wounded during the US bombing of Karlovo airfield, on 28 June 1944. At the end of the war, he was credited with four victory points, earned by 'seriously damaging' a 'Liberator' and a 'Fortress', respectively. Kovachev was instrumental in organising the removal of the so-called 'trophy' aircraft from Austria and their transportation to Bulgaria in mid-1945. He was fired from the army the next year.

unteer pilots, headed by *Ponuchik* Zahari I. Planinski (formerly flying in 1/6. and 4/6. *Orlyatsi*), arrived at Pécs (phonetically: Pech) on 4 April – later, the official “liberation day” of Communist Hungary. Officially, the squadron was placed at the disposal of the Bulgarian 1st Army Staff, but performed no combat activity. Eventually, no actual training on Soviet matériel took place. Instead, the Bulgarian airmen took part in flying captured German warplanes out of Zeltweg and Raffelding airfields, Austria, as detailed below.

'Trophy Gustavs'

During the spring of 1945, units of the Soviet 17 VA (17th Air Army) reported over 300 'Me-109Fs'¹⁶⁹ and Fw 190s captured in Austria, at “*an airfield in a forest*”. According to a Soviet-era Russian book, at one point a Bulgarian delegation, headed by former Soviet Air Force technical officer, Chief Engineer Col. Avgust H. Kabakchiev, asked the Soviet commander of 17 VA, Gen. Sudets [i.e., Colonel General Vladimir A. Sudets], for 50 'trophy' Bf 109s. Sudets bluntly turned down the request, citing he had no authority in this matter. However, the friendlier 17 VA Chief Engineer, Col. Aleksey L. Shepelev, gave his Bulgarian colleagues a hint to turn directly to Stalin with their request. This actually happened through the top Bulgarian Communist leader, Georgi M. Dimitrov, future head of Bulgaria. He succeeded in convincing Stalin on the merits of the Bulgarians' demand. As a result of the successful top-level intervention, an order arrived directly from Stalin instructing Gen. Sudets to grant the request. Accordingly, the

Bulgarians were allowed to select an initial batch of 50 Bf 109s [more like 50 aircraft in total, D.B.¹⁷⁰], repair and fly them away, as soon as it was possible. More followed by train.

Recovery activity on Zeltweg started on 6 April, and lasted until the area was handed over by the Soviets to British units on 21 July. The first time significant number of Bulgarian technicians were flown there was on 14 April, when a Dornier Do 17 of the 73rd *Yato* landed on Zeltweg airfield. While under Soviet control¹⁷¹, the Bulgarian crews recovered a number of aircraft and put them in airworthy condition. Among these so-called 'trophy' aircraft were a number of late-version Bf 109Gs as well. Despite the top-level approval, a sizeable bribe must have been paid by the Bulgarians to the local Soviet Commanders to get the best available aircraft, some of which the Soviets may have needed as well¹⁷².

On 21 July 1945, Soviet forces in the Austrian province of Styria, where Zeltweg is located, pulled back to their post-war occupation zone and the British moved in¹⁷³. Reportedly, the Bulgarians retreated from the airfield at the very last minute, flying out the last airworthy aircraft while the first British troops entered the area. Also reportedly, earlier, the British had protested sharply with the neighbouring Soviet command that “German fighters” repeatedly violated their airspace. When the protest was disregarded, the British dispatched a couple of 'Spitfires' to patrol the area, as well as moving several anti-aircraft guns to occasionally fire upon the intruders. A Canadian source mentions that at least three of them were shot down; however, this claim is not backed by any Bulgarian source. Actually, the Bulgarians waited until the RAF interceptors landed for refuelling, and quickly took off in solo, or in pairs, and flew eastwards, to Pécs assembly point, in Hungary. From Pécs, the aircraft then headed towards Bulgaria, refuelling at Belgrade.

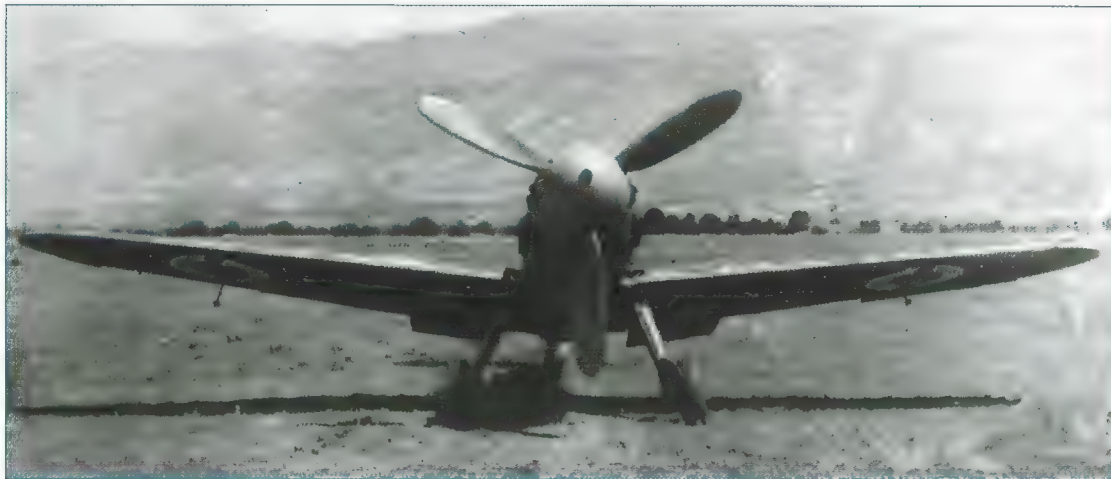
169 Soviet sources often called 'Me 109F' all variants of the Messerschmitt Bf 109, including the G.

170 An original Bulgarian document of so-called 'trophy' armament, including aircraft, lists a total of 48 aircraft, as follows: 2 *Gota* (most probably Go 145 trainer), 8 '*Shtuka* Ju-87-G-2' (i.e., 2 cm cannon armed Ju 87G-2 ground attack aircraft), 19 *Soyka* (i.e., Ar 96 trainer), 17 *Strela* (i.e., Bf 109) and 2 *Gäläh* (i.e., Fw 58 transport). The list is not final, though.

171 Little known fact is that Hungarian airmen, under command of Lt.-Col. Emil Szörényi, prevented the demolition of Zeltweg airfield by German pioneers and handed it over intact, along with 200 airplanes, to Soviet Major Plotnikov (scout unit 17752), on 10 May.

172 One such aircraft originally selected to be removed by Soviet forces, but eventually left behind, might have been Bf 109G-14/U4, W.Nr. 541230, which reportedly featured “*Red star painted over squadron markings, now painted over grey*”. Another Bf 109G-10, W.Nr. 610573, with “*Five-pointed white star, under a four-pointed red star*” was observed by the British. [Source: No. 1 Field Intelligence Unit (Austria) RAF. Report No. 61. Zeltweg airfield, 8.08.1945].

173 The British found on the airfield of Zeltweg deserted by the Soviets a total of 124 aircraft “*standing on their wheels*”. The bombers were lined up in front of the north-east hangar, while the Bf 109s and the Fw 190s were in rows in front of the south-east hangar. The British report, dated 8 August 1945, continues: “*The Russians left all the aircraft where they stood, after disarming and destroying them by the liberal use of screwdrivers, hammers and pick-axes*”. The annex lists all 124 aircraft left behind.



This 'Strela' displays the so-called 'OF' post-war marking, introduced in October 1945, applied on its wing undersurface, to advantage. Despite wearing this 'Republican' military marking (reference to the Republic of Bulgaria, as opposite to the Kingdom of Bulgaria) longer than the so-called 'St. Andrew' marking, photographs of Bf 109s displaying it are much scarcer.

A Bulgarian recovery team also visited the Austrian airfield of Raffelding – last air base of the Hungarian fighter and ground attack force – and removed a number of Bf 109Gs from there (see annex for details). The Bulgarians were possibly allowed by the Soviets to visit the Wiener Neustadt factory (WNF)¹⁷⁴, too, and recover some matériel, but no further details are available at the moment¹⁷⁵.

Poruchik Petăr Manolev has an entry in his logbook for 13 July 1945, a four-hour "*marshrut*" (transliteration of "marching route", or itinerary) with a Ju 52/3m transport from Bozhurishte to Pécs. The venerable tri-motor Junkers transported ferry pilots to Hungary, to fly home the "trophy" aircraft assembled there. Indeed, the next entry in his logbook for 16 July mentions a *Strela* G-10 (sic!), without the usual identification number being given, flown from Pécs to Bozhurishte in an hour-and-three-quarter-long "*marshrut*". Four days later, he flew a *Strela* (the same one, renumbered?), No. 182, from Bozhurishte to Sliven airfield. Manolev did not perform any more ferry flights, as in the next weeks he logged mainly combat training flights aboard mostly *Strela* No. 178, from Sliven air base (see on-line annex).

Ferry flights from Zeltweg to Pécs, then from Pécs to Bulgaria, did not go on without incident, however. An unusually high number of these "trophy" aircraft caught fire in mid-flight, without obvious explanation. Based on oral history, as told by a former *Luftwaffe Feldwebel*, who served with *Flugplatzkommando 1/XVII* at Wiener Neustadt, in March/April 1945, several captured Bf 109Gs – which, based on his memoirs, used to be mostly of the Hungarian air force – crashed while being flown away by Bulgarian pilots. The incidents were investigated, and it was found that the original cooling liquid of the engine was replaced (by the Germans, or by the Hungarians) with petrol/gasoline, to sabotage the aircraft which had to be left behind. This way, the petrol/gasoline would ignite during flight, setting the engine on fire. Indeed, Bulgarian sources confirm the unusually high number of occurrences of aircraft bursting into flames during mid-flight. At least three such cases are known. *Podporuchik* Todor Rozev force landed with a Bf 109G-14 on Belgrade airfield due to engine fire. Similarly, *Podporuchik* Mihail Uzunov's *Gustav* caught fire in mid-air on 16 July 1945. The pilot saved himself by bailing out somewhere in the Pécs-Belgrade area. Finally, the '109 flown by *Yato* leader *Poruchik* Zahari 'Tutmanikov', or 'Tuti' Planinski caught fire near Nish, also on 16 July 1945. He managed to force land, but could not exit in time and burned to death in the cockpit. Despite these incidents, most aircraft reached Bulgaria safely by the end of July 1945, meaning not all of them were sabotaged by their former owners, or the Bulgarians discovered the deadly 'trick' and filled the cooling system with proper fluid. Other "trophies" were moved from Hungary to Bulgaria by rail, as proven by surviving photographs and the final tally. Some of those were unassembled factory-fresh airframes, still packed in their original crates.

Considerable inconsistency and contradiction surrounds the number and types of aircraft recovered at Zeltweg and Raffelding, air bases formerly used by the Germans and Hungarians. Various Bulgarian sources give various numbers, ranging from 22 units (G-14/U4s and G-10/U4s), or 42 units (G-6s, G-10s and G-12s), to "more than 100 Bf 109G/Ks". Other Bulgarian sources even include among the flown-out '109s the very last model, the Bf 109K-4, which is highly improbable. Reference to 'Bf 109K' can be found in the post-war memoirs of famed fighter pilot *Kpt.* Asen Kovachev as well¹⁷⁶. He was in charge of the second group of airmen assigned with flying out the 'trophy' aircraft from Zeltweg, via Pécs, to Bulgaria. Kovachev recalled that in total 20 Bf 109G-6s and 22 'Bf 109Ks' (perhaps Bf 109G-10s, sub-type

174 The leader of the technical bureau of the Supply Department of the VNVV, Pencho Kirov Drăndarov, performed a business trip to Pécs, then to Wiener Neustadt and back between 26 June and 18 August 1945, which was certainly linked to the recovery of captured matériel and their transportation to Bulgaria.

175 The Author would welcome a detailed study by a Bulgarian researcher based on the local archives, related to this obscure post-war aircraft recovery missions in Austria that would clarify the many unclear details.

176 Published in '*Spomeni na lettsi ot VNVV*', Sofia, 2008, pages 40-43.



Poor quality, but rare picture of a line-up of several Bf 109G-6s sporting the so-called 'OF' marking (see the fuselage of the aircraft in the background). In this time period, all fighter aircraft were renumbered, and received a set of new white serial numbers in the 1-40 batch, instead of the earlier coloured ones, ranging from 1 to 16.

unknown to the Bulgarians at that time) were eventually flown to Bulgaria¹⁷⁷. In fact, the British who made an inventory of what they found on Zeltweg after the Soviets' retreat list the following sub-types: G-5/R5 (most probably G-8), G-14, G-14/U4 and G-10/U4.

The Author found only one reliable primary Bulgarian document, which lists the following 'trophy' aircraft, already on Bulgarian soil, assigned to various locations: 2 *Gota* (probably Go 145), 8 "*Shtuka* Ju-87G-2" (sic!), 19 *Soyka* (Ar 96), 17 *Strela* (Bf 109) and 2 *Gäläb* (Fw 58). At the time of this report, the Bf 109s were located at S.R.F. Karlovo, an air force repair unit. Unfortunately, no information on their sub-type is given by the original document. Certainly, this list is incomplete, as proven below.

Another reliable source is the Yugoslav archives¹⁷⁸. Based on Yugoslav reports, there were 92 *Gustavs* in Bulgarian service on the last day of July 1948. Their sub-types – again according to Yugoslav sources – were the following: 16 G-2, 3 G-4, 43 G-6, 1 G-8, 12 G-14 and 17 G-10. Of the G-6s, 12 airframes were converted into two-seat, dual-control version, also based on the aforementioned sales deal with Yugoslavia. Of these '109s' – based solely on their sub-types – the G-8, G-14s and G-10s were certainly 'trophy' aircraft, as were some G-6 airframes converted into two-seaters. This detail puts the number of 'trophy' *Gustavs* taken to Bulgaria in mid-1945 to at least 30; however, the final number was much higher, as most of the G-6s and almost certainly all G-4s were also booty. The aircraft lost en-route, plus attrition from mid-1945 to mid-1948, amounted to a number of aircraft, estimated to at least ten. Therefore, it's safe to assume that the number of aircraft flown to Bulgaria, 42, recalled by veteran pilot Kovachev, is the closest to reality. More "trophies" were transported by train; besides aircraft, stockpiles of engines, accessories and spare parts as well. The Czechoslovak report from April 1948 (see page 102 for details) lists 108 *Gustavs*, of which almost all can be assumed as being 'trophy' aircraft. Based on all these sources, the Author puts the total number of booty Bf 109Gs taken to Bulgaria to slightly over 100. Not all were impressed into active service, though.

Based on the couple of published photographs¹⁷⁹ of these 'trophy' Bf 109Gs flown out from Austria, they were either brand new, unpainted aircraft (possibly found still crated), or scarcely-used aircraft in previous Axis service. Some '109s' featured the tall fin-and-rudder, while others had the standard one, some were fitted with tall tail wheel, others with standard ones. Many do not appear to have the main undercarriage covers installed. Finally, most were fitted with the so-called '*Erla-Haube*', while at least one had the standard canopy.

Once these so-called "trophy" Bf 109Gs¹⁸⁰ were impressed in Bulgarian service they received *Nomenklaturen Nomer* (NN) subsequent to the numbers assigned to aircraft received from Germany. Because the final total number of these 'original' German '109s' is uncertain, but most probably is around 164, which may amount to about NN 177/7057 (some aircraft were destroyed soon after handover by the

177 Kovachev also recalled that a U.S. airborne commando landed on Zeltweg airfield to evacuate the Me 262 jets parked over there. Allegedly, they filled the tanks of all the Me 262s they found on the airfield with help of local Austrians, then the jets were flown away by (German?) pilots to the Allied zone. On the WNF factory airfield a few He 162 jets were found, too.

178 The Author wishes to thank Boris Ciglić for his invaluable assistance.

179 Unfortunately, these photos were not allowed to be included in this book by a Bulgarian researcher, despite repeated requests by this book's author.

180 From 23 August 1945, the aircraft type was officially identified in documents by the 'MG' code.

Germans, while still wearing *Luftwaffe* marking and codes, before they were officially allocated Bulgarian serial numbers; the Author believes that 158 Bf 109Gs received Bulgarian serial number), the “trophy” Messerschmitts must have had their NN higher than this number. The highest number found by the Author in Bulgarian documents is 192, written off on 23 March 1947¹⁸¹ (along with nine others, Nos. 111, 112, 114, 147, 164, 171, 180, 181 and 182, all most probably sold to Yugoslavia). Certainly, the series ran higher, passing 200, and may have gone as high as 270. However, all existing warplanes (Bf 109Gs included) were renumbered in late 1945, so the original ID of the *Strelas* gave way to new serial numbers, ranging from 1 to 40 in each reformed *orlyak*.

Order No. 507/28.12.1946, issued by the commander of VV, refers to test pilots completing “serial examinations” of a “Me 109 C-14”. As this document was written in Cyrillic (the alphabet lacking the character “G”, thus the closest letter “C” was typed instead), the sub type must have been G-14. This is a further documentary evidence of ‘trophy’ aircraft used in the Bulgarian air force, as late as one-and-a-half-year after they had arrived in the country.

The captured aircraft did not receive Bulgarian markings immediately after they were impressed in service. Some flew for a while displaying no markings at all, despite the existing regulations. Testimony to this is a peculiar incident that happened on 23 October 1945, thus at least three months after the “trophy” aircraft had reached Bulgaria. That day, Yak-9¹⁸², 144/7087, flown by *Podporuchik* Lalyo T. Kolev of the 2/6. *Orlyak*, landed on Bozhurishte airfield after the pilot reported engine problems. He called four ground personnel to push the aircraft to its designated parking location. Previously, two other pilots had received orders to fly “two booty Messerschmitt 109G-10” (sic!) belonging to the 6. *Polk* (no *orlyak* is mentioned). After a short flight, one of the pilots, *Podporuchik* Veselin S. Tenev, also reported problems and asked for permission to land, which was dully granted. However, somebody had changed the position of the landing “T” sign, whose indication was followed by ‘Veso’ Tenev. Unfortunately, the pilot could not clearly see the area in front of him, including the disabled Yak-9 being pushed by four people, as the windshield was covered with oil, which restricted visibility. As a consequence, the blind ‘109 rammed the Yak-9 and cut it into shreds with its propeller. The aircraft was a write-off. There is no word on the fate of the pilot, or the four ground crewmembers. The post-accident report concludes with a highly interesting note: “The Me 109 had no markings at all, despite Order No. 98/X.1945, which forbade any aircraft to fly without the new [i.e., OF] marking”.

This original photo had nothing written on its verso. Nevertheless, it can be safely assumed it was taken post war, judged by the monocolour spinner (probably yellow, or light blue, depending of the yato they belonged to) and the dark squiggles visible on the cowl bulge, typical to the post-war camouflage scheme worn by surviving ‘Strelas’.

181 Among the DB 605A-1 engines written off on 23 March 1947, one was identified as ‘V13’ (actually sold to Yugoslavia).

182 From 23 August 1945, the aircraft type was officially identified by the ‘YA’ code.



With the increase of airspace violations by Turkish warplanes, a decision was made to relocate 3/6. *Orlyak* to Bärshen airfield, just south of Sliven, not far from the Turkish border. No report exists of any air-to-air shoot-downs. However, there are reports of two Turkish ‘Spitfires’ being shot down by Bulgarian border guards’ ground fire near Sozopol, located on the borders of the Black Sea, on Monday, 9 February 1948. One crashed on the beach and tore off its wings, while the other one fell into the sea. The latter Spitfire’s pilot drowned, while the other one was captured slightly injured. Based on an original document, it appears a third Spitfire, wearing a white crescent on a red flag, had also been captured earlier, in March 1947, intact, then was returned. A note sent by the commander of military unit 4205, No. 37, based at *Vodoletishte Chayka* (Seagull Seabase), on 31 March 1947 reports the following: “After the emergency landing of the Turkish Spitfayer (i.e., Spitfire), No. 5792, the aircraft was sealed, and it was handed over to the Turkish airman in that condition at its acceptance (return).”

The number of Bf 109Gs in active service stayed steady during the first half of 1945. It started to decrease from August on, but not significantly. This was due to the transfer of all serviceable ‘109s from 2/6. *Orlyak* to the sister 3/6. *Orlyak*, which thus remained the only group still to be equipped with the Messerschmitt fighter. With this move, presumably, the worn machines were withdrawn from first line service and scrapped, as a regular fighter group did not need so many aircraft anyhow, its standard equipment theoretically consisting of 40 aircraft (plus staff).

Number of serviceable+unserviceable Bf 109s, from January 1945 to January 1946

| Date/Squadron | 1.01 | 1.02 | 1.04 | 1.05 | 1.06 | 1.08 | 1.09 | 1.10 | 1.11 | 1.12 | 15.01. |
|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|--------|
| 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 16+18 | 19+9 | 19+9 | 21+7 | 21+7 | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 14+17 | 15+17 | 22+10 | 23+9 | 23+9 | 42+8 | 42+8 | 42+8 | 35+4 | 48+5 | 59+3 |
| Total no. of a/c | 65 | 60 | 60 | 60 | 60 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 39 | 53 | 62 |

In a document dated 27 July 1945, four old Bf 109Es are listed with 3/6. *Orlyak* (Nos. 2, 11, 12 and 18), with the following note: “to stay there”. It’s uncertain if these aircraft were counted in the above total; however, the Author believes it’s unlikely. The same document gives the total number of extant Bf 109Gs as 65, with the note: “the aircraft with 2/6. *Orlyak* to be handed over to 3/6. *Orlyak*.”

Interestingly, the influx of extra fighter matériel reflects in the VV order of battle of combat units only in December 1945 and January 1946. A possible explanation might be that, simultaneously with the addition of the newcomers in good technical shape, the old and worn aircraft were withdrawn from active service and sent into conservation, or scrapped. On 1 October 1946, among the 596 (!) conserved aircraft 31 were Bf 109Gs (along with 93 Yak-9s). More Bf 109Gs could be part of the total of 206 stored trainers of unspecified type. The same document mentions that 97 aircraft were scrapped in September, including 20 Bf 109Gs. On that date, the Order of Battle of *Văzdushni Voyski* (the “royal” appellation has long disappeared by then¹⁸³) does not list a single Bf 109G in service with the 6. *Iztrebitelen Royak*¹⁸⁴ (new designation used instead of *polk*, or regiment), only 20 Yak-9s and three dual-seat Yak-9Vs. Parallel with the regiment name change on 1 February 1946, the group numbering changed as well, e.g., from 1/6. *Orlyak* to 16. *Orlyak*, from 2/6. *Orlyak* to 26. *Orlyak*, and so forth.

An undated hand-written order of battle, probably originating from 1947 – presumably a plan only – is the last one the Author has found that includes the *Strela* as first-line fighter. It lists the following units (from top to down):

- SAK (Смесен Авиационен Корпус, or Mixed Aviation Corps), C/O Gen. Mahy. Zahariev
- 6. IAD (Изтребителна Авиационна Дивизия, or Fighter Aviation Division), C/O Polk. Gergov
- 16. IAP (Изтребителен Авиационен Полк, or Fighter Aviation Regiment), 40 Yak-9, C/O Mahy. Atanasov
- 26. IAP (Изтребителен Авиационен Полк, or Fighter Aviation Regiment), 40 Yak-9, C/O Mahy. Radev
- 36. IAP (Изтребителен Авиационен Полк, or Fighter Aviation Regiment), 40 Me-109, C/O Mahy. Bliznakov

One can notice the change to Soviet style unit names, for example division (*diviziya*, a new term in VV) instead of regiment (*polk*), and regiment (*polk*) instead of group (*orlyak*). The ‘Sovietisation’ of the Bulgarian air force was apparently in full swing. This can be also supported by the fact that Major Bliznakov was nominated to head the Bf 109G-equipped unit, even though he certainly did not participate in the war - in fact, no trace could be found of him in the officers’ ranks. He was probably a Communist Party member, perhaps even a partisan with little or no piloting skills, but a ‘trusted comrade’, unlike the former ‘royalist’ pilots.

¹⁸³ It is interesting to observe that at that time, besides the 480 ‘regular’ officers, 29 ‘political officers’ (i.e., representing the Bulgarian Communist Party) were also part of the air force cadre.

¹⁸⁴ The name *royak* (literally, swarm) for an air force regiment replaced the previously used *polk* on 1 February 1946. The usage lasted only until the end of the year, when the unit’s name reverted to *polk* for a short while, until it switched to *diviziya*.



As noted in the description of the September 1944 combat activity, two officers, *Por.* Aleksandrov and *Por.* Stoyanov, defected to Italy on 25 June 1946 with their Yak-9Ms. Both pilots, members of the 16. *Iztrebitelen Orlyak* of the 6. *Iztrebitelen Royak*, sought political asylum. This high-profile event obviously caused international embarrassment to Sofia, by then firmly entrenched in the eastern Bloc ruled by Moscow. The incident was then used by the Bulgarian Communist regime to purge the ranks of the air force of the remaining so-called 'royalist' airmen. Many of them were subsequently imprisoned after fast-track trials by kangaroo courts, some died in captivity. Room was thus made for a young generation of airmen, with 'healthy social background' (i.e., poor workers and peasants), who could then be offered a superior quality of life and indoctrinated at will with Communist views and party policies. The withdrawal of "the German matériel" (i.e., Bf 109G) from first-line service was hastened as well, and the speedy introduction in service of the Yak-9 was ordered¹⁸⁵. How the Bf 109Gs were linked to the defection is unclear. Certainly, this high-profile incident sealed the fate of the Bf 109G in active VV service.

By 1947, the days of the Messerschmitt fighter in first-line Bulgarian service were largely over, after a tumultuous six years. The last airworthy '109s' soldiered on in training units. Despite the influx of a large amount of Soviet matériel, the need for fighter aircraft for training remained high. That's why student fighter pilot kept using the Bf 109G, in parallel with the few two-seat 'UYak-9s'. To facilitate the handling of the rather capricious '109, Bulgarian engineers converted about a dozen '109G-6s into two-seater, believed to be identified as 'UMe-109', called officially *UStrela* (see appropriate chapter). Despite using these two-seaters, the difficulties of mastering the Bf 109 persisted. Only in an unspecified month in 1946, 3/6. (or 36.) *Orlyak* reportedly had eight aircraft involved in accidents! Despite the attrition, based on Yugoslav reports, a total of 92 *Gustavs* still existed in Bulgaria in July 1948. However, this tally was incomplete, as can be seen in the next paragraph.

A report summing up the findings of a business trip of the director of the Czechoslovak Avia company, *Dipl.-Eng.* Kurzweil, to Bulgaria at end of April 1948, includes the following: during negotiations with the Bulgarian A.F. Chief Engineer, Col. Avgust Kabakchiev, for delivery of Czechoslovak-produced aircraft (e.g., Siebel Si 204, Arado Ar 96), Argus engines and various spare parts, the Bulgarian side offered in return a large quantity of little used Bf 109Gs (flying time from 2 to 30 hours). More precisely, the offer consisted of:

- 1) 49 fuselages (mixture of G-14, G-14/U4, G-10/R2 and G-10/U4 versions),
 - 2) 47 little used aircraft (31 G-6, 1 G-8, 3 G-14 and 12 G-10), having up to 30 hours flying time (70% had less than 2 hours),
 - 3) 12 never used aircraft (complete, but disassembled: 7 G-14, 5 G-10).
- Total: 108 aircraft (excluding spares).

Post-accident photo of a 'trophy' ex-Luftwaffe, or ex-Hungarian Bf 109G – possibly a G-6 or G-14, fitted with G-10 wings. The main undercarriage has wide tyres, which are matched by wide wing 'bumps' – all indicators of standard G-6, or early G-14. Notice the so-called 'OF' marking (the white areas are actually light grey), placing the time of this event to 1946, or later, up to 1951.

¹⁸⁵ Original text: "Заповед по летателна подготовка: Поради бягството от 25.06.1946 г. да се извърши сдаване на немската материална част (самолети) на 16, 26, 36 орляк и да се проведе обучение за преминаване на ЯК-9. 26-ти орляк да се изнесе от летище Балчик на летище Божурище."

Two stills illustrating the 'Yugoslav affair' of 1948. The long shadows place the moment of the photo was made at dawn. The original description of this pair of photographs depicting a Bf 109G-10 in Yugoslav service includes the "ex-Bulgarian aircraft..." note. This implies that the aircraft is one of the 'trophy' ones removed from Austria with the approval of the Soviets. Indeed, the proper caption reads: "on 28 November 1951, Poruchnik (2nd Lt.) Albin Pibernik of the 83rd Fighter Regiment force-landed with Messerschmitt Bf 109G-10, 'White 11', W.Nr.150880, after the left wheel had fallen off during take-off from Pula airfield". W.Nr.150880 was built at Erla aircraft factory in December 1944, and belonged to the Luftwaffe's II./JG 52 Jagdgruppe when captured at Zeltweg by the Red Army. Notice that the head armour had been removed from the cockpit area, to lighten the aircraft's weight. An interesting combination, rarely seen on a G-10, is the long tailwheel and standard (low) tail section.



This offer was suggested as assistance to the Avia company with post-war production of the Czechoslovak version of the Bf 109G (Avia S.99/S.199), which took place at that time. There is no confirmation that the deal was eventually concluded, but most probably was not, as many of these aircraft actually ended up in Yugoslavia, as detailed below.

The 'Yugoslav Affair'

According to the Paris peace treaty of 10.02.1947, which came into force on 15.09.1947, the Bulgarian Air Force was allowed to have a maximum of 90 aircraft, of which only 70 could be "combat types" (fighters included), and no bombers with internal bomb load. As Communist Bulgaria and Yugoslavia – former enemies – came closer after the war, a deal was struck for a total of 291 surplus warplanes to be handed over to Yugoslavia, as an escape from the strict peace treaty limitations. Otherwise, the 'surplus' matériel should have been scrapped in Bulgaria. Accordingly, 55 Yak-9Ms and UYak-9s, 48 Il-2s and 89 Pe-2s were ferried to the neighbouring state starting in February 1947, while 59 Bf 109Gs were transported later on. The last batch of aircraft handed over to Yugoslavia consisted of indigenously-built aircraft, namely 30 KB-11As and 19 DAR-9 trainers. For all this matériel, Bulgaria received 80 Il-2 metal fuselages to replace the wooden ones of its remaining 'Shturmoviks', as well as an undisclosed amount of cash.

In many Bulgarian and foreign publications it is mentioned that the aircraft were given to Yugoslavia as per Belgrade's 'war reparation' demand, amounting to US\$25 million (1947 value). This is only partially true, however. The details of this murky deal are unfortunately unavailable. On 1 August 1947, Yugoslavia unilaterally cancelled all the Bulgarian debt¹⁸⁶. It is interesting to mention that even after

¹⁸⁶ With the 'Treaty on Friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance' of 1947, signed in Bled, the Yugoslav Government officially cancelled all Bulgarian war indemnities through a unilateral act. After the two Communist countries became antagonistic, all clauses of the agreement were abolished by Bulgaria on 1 October 1949, interestingly, except for the annulment of war reparations.



This ultra-rare trio of photos depict several Bf 109G-6s in post-war active service, subsequent to the introduction of the so-called 'OF' Republican military markings in October 1945. One immediately notices the unusual camouflage scheme the 'Gustav' wears. It can be speculated that the colours are of Soviet origin; however, this theory cannot be proven. According to the regulation in effect at that date, the light coloured spinner was either painted light blue, or yellow (more likely the latter), depending on the fighter group this particular aircraft was part of (in case of yellow, it meant 3/6., later 36. Orlyak). In the background, 'Strela' Nos. 30 and 32, wearing the same peculiar three-tone camouflage scheme, can be observed.

the two Communist countries' friendly relationship worsened following the Tito-Stalin split in June 1948, the transfer of the warplanes continued unabated – the last batch of Bf 109Gs (6 Bf 109G-2s and 5 UMe 109s) was handed over to Yugoslavia in December 1948.

From Serbian sources¹⁸⁷, the following version of the story emerges. At the end of July 1946, Bulgarian Air Force deputy commander, Maj. Gen. Zahari Zahariev¹⁸⁸, approached the Yugoslav ambassador in Sofia with an idea – which he said was his own – that all Bulgarian 'surplus' aircraft (amounting to more than 200 units) should be transferred to Yugoslavia, for free. Otherwise, they had to be scrapped. Later on, the request was modified by the Commanding Officer of the Bulgarian Air Force, in effect that Yugoslavia would take some of the warplanes, including the Bf 109Gs, for temporarily safekeeping only, while the bulk of the other warplanes would still be offered for free, as originally proposed.

The Chief of Staff of Yugoslav Army, General Koča Popović, was immediately informed about the offer. He gave his consent and informed the ambassador that, in case the situation is urgent, the aircraft can be flown to Novi Sad airfield immediately. At that moment – according to the Yugoslav source – some 48 Bf 109Gs were airworthy, assembled at Karlovo, at the local aviation workshop, and available for immediate transfer. Others were disassembled in crates. More *Strelas* were under refurbishment.

The aircraft transfer was postponed until the moment of signing of the Paris Peace Treaty on 10 February 1947. Of the 60 *Gustavs* chosen for relocation to Yugoslavia, 48 were planned to be transferred by air, while the additional ones were disassembled and prepared for transport by rail. Additionally, 40 rail wagons loaded with spare parts were readied to be transferred as well.

It is unclear if the aircraft handed over to Yugoslavia were officially written off, or were removed from air force stock in some other way. A collection of three write-off protocols jointly dated 25 March 1947, signed by Maj. Gen. *Letets* Zahariev himself, when many Bf 109Gs with high NN number (including 180, 181, 182 and 192, which were all so-called 'trophy' aircraft, thus the most advanced *Strela* sub-type) were written off (among the total of 32 Bf 109Gs and an identical number of DB 605A-1 engines) most probably covers an initial quantity of aircraft transferred to Yugoslavia. This theory is reinforced by the fact that G-2 No. 23 is also included in that list. This aircraft is actually W.Nr. 14792, which is currently displayed at the Belgrade Aviation Museum in Yugoslav A.F. livery and mentioned in the description as "ex-Bulgarian A.F.". Engine No. "V13" (sic!), which shows up later in Yugoslavia, is also listed. (Another occurrence of such strange engine W.Nr. was "V17").

At that moment, there was no immediate interest in Yugoslavia for the reintroduction into active service of the obsolescent Bf 109G¹⁸⁹, as long-term deliveries of modern Soviet aircraft were anticipated¹⁹⁰. Therefore, it was suggested to General Zahariev that they could be sold to Czechoslovakia, as an alternative solution. In the end, a decision was made to send via rail 48 *Gustavs* to Borongaj airfield by late March 1947, where they would be stored until a final solution could be reached. This happened, as planned.

The equipment of the Yugoslav Air Force with Soviet matériel did not go on as planned, however. The problems came to light in late 1946, during the negotiations in Moscow for a new contract for deliveries of various military hardware, including aircraft. The problems culminated in the summer of 1947, because of the breaking of many contractual obligations by the Soviet side. As a consequence, aircraft and spare parts were not delivered on schedule. The condition of the Yugoslav fighter units became critical by late 1947, despite the late delivery of 40 Yak-9Ps by the USSR. The handover of Bulgarian surplus war matériel was now suddenly welcome, as it would ease the dire situation.

At that moment, the destiny of the 48 stored *Gustavs* at Borongaj was still not decided. In early February 1948, the Chief of the Czechoslovakian Air Force arrived in Belgrade to negotiate the purchase of these Bulgarian *Gustavs*. The negotiations ended without agreement. At the request of the Chief of the Bulgarian Air Force, Gen. Zahariev, the question of the Bf 109Gs in Yugoslavia was solved during negotiations with the Yugoslav Air Force Commander-in-Chief, General Zdenko Ulepić. At that mo-

187 Thanks to Boris Ciglić for most of the info coming from ex-Yugoslav sources.

188 Former reconnaissance pilot Zahari Zahariev fled to the Soviet Union in 1931 due to his pro-Communist views, where he changed his name to Volkan Semenovitch Goranov. Participated in the Spanish civil war as bomber pilot, with the Turkish *nom de guerre* Khalil Ekrem. After Sofia's about-face of 9 September 1944, he returned to Bulgaria, and took back his real name. Since 1945, he became Deputy Commander of the Bulgarian Air Force. Between 1947-1955, he was the Commander of the Air Force and Deputy Defence Minister of the People's Republic of Bulgaria. Promoted to Major General in 1947 and Lieutenant General in 1951. In 1959, by then Colonel General, Zahariev was appointed military attaché to Moscow. From 1965, he became again Deputy Minister of Defence of the People's Republic of Bulgaria. Retired in 1973 and died in 1987.

189 Yugoslav forces captured about two dozen *Gustavs* in various conditions, all in Yugoslavia. Of these, 17 were made operational and 10 included in the Yugoslav AF register. These machines were withdrawn from service and scrapped in 1947 before the Bulgarian machines were acquired.

190 Reputedly, the Soviets offered their Yugoslav ally the opportunity to go to Austria and pick up whatever aircraft they wanted. However, they turned down the generous offer, as the arrival of new Soviet machines, to be delivered 'en masse', was expected.



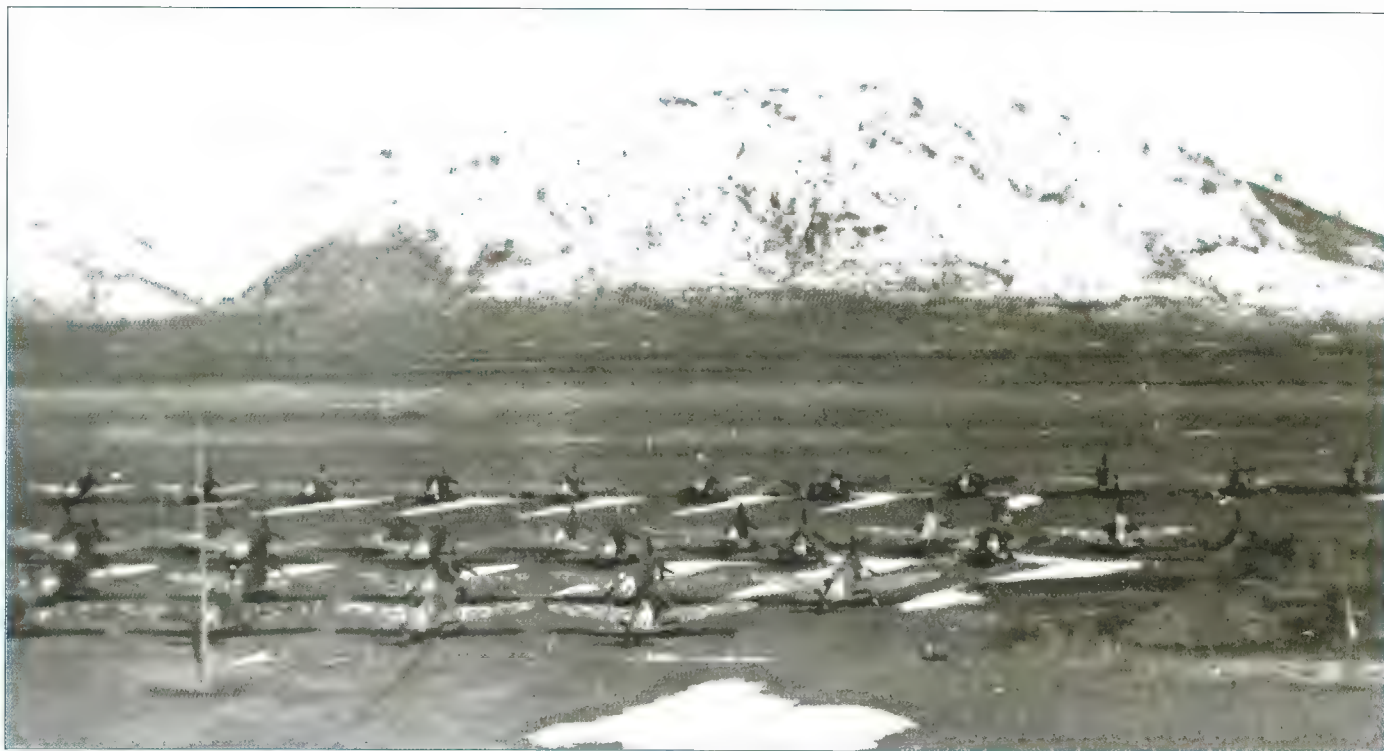
ment, Ulepić was informed that a total of 91 Bf 109Gs was at its disposition (16 G-2, 3 G-4, 43 G-6, 17 G-10 and 12 G-14 – thus including so-called ‘trophy’ aircraft recovered in Austria in mid-1945 – and a number of two-seat UMe-109s, too), 48 of which had already been transferred to Yugoslavia. The Bulgarian side proposed that they could be ceded to Yugoslavia in exchange for cooperation between the two countries’ aviation industries. In the end, all Bf 109s and related matériel (which included 60 spare DB 605 engines and armament) were sold for 150 million Yugoslav Dinar (about 20.8 million Bulgarian Leva). With the approval of the highest Yugoslav military authorities, *General-Lajtnant* Ulepić, and the Commissar of the Yugoslav Air Force, *General-Major* Milija Stanišić, were authorized by Marshal Tito to sign a contract for the takeover of all Bulgarian *Gustavs* as per the negotiated conditions.

In the meantime, the previously stored ‘109s were reassembled at Zagreb-Borongaj. By the end of August, all aircraft have been overhauled and were in airworthy status, totalling 47 Bf 109Gs and one ‘Bf 109G-12’¹⁹¹. They were painted and received new markings in accordance with the Yugoslav regulations. Several aircraft were transferred to Pleso airfield in late July 1948, among them the sole dual control one, for the transition course of Yugoslav pilots¹⁹². To help in transition, 1st Lt. Yordan Ferdinandov

‘White 30’ in ubiquitous position; broken main undercarriage leg – one of the (few) weak design points of Herr Messerschmitt’s brainchild. The sideview allows the onlooker to study details of the post-war camouflage scheme, as well the so-called ‘OF-znak’ (OF-marking). The difference in shade of the serial number and fuselage marking’s outer ring – both supposedly white – is noteworthy. Based on its Werknummer (612737) it was a G-10.

191 As detailed in the respective chapter, the two-seater Bf 109G was not the original German G-12 sub-type, but rather the Bulgarian version, called ‘UMe-109’, *Ustrela*.

192 Some sources mention that more aircraft were converted to two-seat trainers in Bulgaria based on Yugoslav request.



Another mediocre quality, but rare photo taken at Karlovo airfield, probably during the winter of 1946/1947, depicts scores of 'Strelas', lined up on the snowy terrain adjacent to the runway. The author counted 46 aircraft visible on the photo. Probably some more are outside the field of vision. As far as is visible, none of these Bf 109Gs have identical camouflage schemes; the camouflage colour shades appear different as well. None of them wear the so-called 'OF-marking' on the wing upper surface, as per the regulation in effect at that time. Time had passed over these Bf 109Gs. The ones in better shape are awaiting shipment to Yugoslavia, as surplus war matériel, the rest the wrecker's axe. This photo symbolises the end of the 'Strela' in Bulgarian service.

arrived from Bulgaria. During the transition course, the sole 'UMe-109' was slightly damaged by student pilot Petrovski and Ferdinandov, when one leg failed to extend during landing on 11 August 1948.

In late November 1948, Yugoslav pilots Petrovski, Skale, Pintarić and Martinović, led by *Kap.* Radovan Daković, went to Bulgaria to transfer the remaining aircraft. In three shuttle missions, they transferred from Karlovo, via Sofia, to Niš 6 G-2s and 5 G-12s. During the first shuttle on 30 November, Martinović had a landing accident at Vrazhdebna airfield with a 'G-12'. The aircraft was slightly damaged, thus remained in Bulgaria, and was never delivered. The last '109s were flown out of Bulgaria on 21 December, first to Niš and by the end of the year to Zemun base. Reportedly, the *Strelas* kept their VV markings and codes during transfer and even in the first weeks spent in Yugoslavia.

In the end, a total of 59 Bf 109Gs arrived in Yugoslavia¹⁹³ (6 G-2, 27 G-6, 1 G-8, 9 G-10, 10 G-14 and 6 dual-control), along with 15 spare DB 605 engines. Further deliveries prematurely ceased due to by then 'frosty' Bulgarian-Yugoslav relations. With deliveries suddenly stopped, 44 Bf 109Gs stayed in Bulgarian service (10 G-2, 3 G-4, 16 G-6, 8 G-10, 2 G-14 and 5 G-12), along with the few *Strelas* still extant in training units and various repair shops. Further aircraft remained in crates, unassembled.

In Yugoslavian service, the pilots and technicians faced the same problems with the obsolescence *Gustavs* that their Bulgarian colleagues did: handling difficulties, as well as low serviceability. In December 1949, for example, a total of 18 *Gustavs* of the 172nd Fighter Regiment were waiting for greater or lesser repair work. The last Bf 109G soldiered on in Yugoslav service until August 1952. After that, the survivors were put in storage until 1953, then scrapped, except for a few units which went on display in technical schools, then in museums. A Bf 109G-2, W.Nr. 14792, is currently displayed in the Belgrade aviation museum. On the label in front of the exhibit it's mentioned as: 'ex-Bulgarian'¹⁹⁴. At least one of the originally ex-Hungarian, then ex-Bulgarian, then ex-Yugoslav *Gustavs* found its way abroad, to a US museum, where it is currently displayed in spurious *Luftwaffe* marking¹⁹⁵.

193 The same number is also given by Serbian author Aleksander Zhitovich in his study called *Satrudnichestvo Mezhdu Voenovozdushnite sili na Yugoslaviya i Bulgariya (1945–1948 g.)*, i.e. Co-operation Between the Air Forces of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, published in the Bulgarian historical magazine *Voennoistorichestvi Sbornik*, 1/2008, page 60, without giving any further details, however.

194 Indeed, the aircraft was formerly NN 23/7057, 'Green 4', of 682. *Yato*, damaged 50% in air combat on 1 August 1943.

195 Bf 109G-10/U4, W.Nr. 610937 (US civil registration N109EV). It was manufactured in 1944, as G-14, W.Nr. 127914. Later on, it was modernized and upgraded to G-10/U4 by WNF in January 1945. In May 1945, it was taken by Bulgarians as 'trophy'. Three years later, it was transferred to Yugoslavia, where was registered as '9644', 'White 44'. It made its last flight on 17.10.1950. On 2.3.1953, it was officially written off and given as schooling tool to the Machine Faculty in Belgrade. In 1979, it was given to the Yugoslav Aviation Museum in Belgrade. Due to lack of funds for restoration, the aircraft was sold to an English warbird collector, Doug Arnold, in 1984, where it was restored. In 1989, the aircraft was purchased by Michael King Smith on behalf of Evergreen Aviation & Space Museum, McMinnville, Oregon, USA. From 1991 to 1996, it was restored again, then exhibited as the personal mount of the worlds' most successful fighter pilot, Eric Hartmann.



This strangely developed, or aged (partly positive, partly negative) photograph reveals a few highly interesting details. Most interesting is the apparently different shades of the two aircraft's engine cowlings. This is the only occurrence observed by the Author on period photos that might somewhat support the claim put forward by several Bulgarian modellers, in effect that the Bulgarian Messerschmitts' engine cowlings (and rudders) were painted in the squadron colours: red, green, or white. Based on scores of minutely studied photos, the Author strongly rejects this theory, and firmly believes that when the engine cowling was painted uniformly, that must have been only in yellow, in line with the Axis recognition colour. The difference in shade visible on this particular photo could be attributed to the strange finish of the print, as well as different shades of yellow paint being used (RLM 04, RLM 27, or locally sourced one), whatever was at hand at that time. The camouflage colour of the lighter engine cowling could also be missing, showing the primer basecoat colour. The Bf 109G-2 in the foreground is 'Green 5', while the one in the background is 'Green 7'. However, the aircraft in the middle, which displays an unusually small national marking on the fuselage, has no coloured identification number applied yet on the fuselage and wing undersurface. They all belong to the first VNV fighter squadron equipped with the 'Gustav', namely 682. Yato, photographed in mid-1943.

Swansong

Despite the partially completed deal with Yugoslavia, over 50 Bf 109Gs remained in Bulgaria, soldiering on¹⁹⁶, including about seven dual-control ones, used as trainers. In 1948, a group of young pilots with 'healthy origins' (i.e., sons of factory workers, or landless peasants) from the first 'partisan class' of the newly formed Air Force Piloting School was chosen to go to the USSR to train to fly jet aircraft. The Soviets wanted these Bulgarian students to learn to fly a combat aircraft before going to the USSR. Therefore, a Bf 109 training course was formed at Karlovo in 1949¹⁹⁷.

A detailed register, including all aircraft in service with the air force, compiled at an unknown date post war, possibly in the early 1950s, lists two groups of *Strelas*: G-2s (Nos. 2-11) and so-called 'trophy' Gs (Nos. 22-31)¹⁹⁸, see separate annex. No. 26, that we know was destroyed in an accident (see last colour profile), is missing from the list, as is No. 1. The second (theoretically Nos. 12-21) and the fourth (theoretically Nos. 32-40) batches are missing. Most probably, those were among the aircraft transferred to Yugoslavia in 1947-1948. Interestingly, the last *Strela* listed in the register, No. 31, identified by the author as G-10 based on its *Werknummer*, was fitted with a DB 605D engine, as factory standard. By contrast, other two *Strelas* from this group of 'trophy' aircraft, also identified as G-10 based on their *Werknummern*, were fitted with DB 605A-1 engine, used in earlier versions (G-2/G-6/G-14).

As the Messerschmitt was notoriously difficult to learn to be flown by green pilots, all prospective students had to pass through the crash course. Until the end of 1949, they had to master the type, and also to train in attacking 'enemy' targets. From these times, the crash of the student pilot Terziyski is famous. During take-off, the Bf 109 made a typical sudden turn to the left and crashed into a hangar full of Yak-9s. The onlookers rushed to the crash scene in anticipation of finding the unlucky pilot's corpse; however, they could not find him. It turned out that the impact threw the pilot out of the cockpit, behind the hangar. They also learned that the crash pilot had walked alone from the scene straight to the doctor's office, having suffered only a few insignificant bruises.

In 1950, a new batch of freshly graduated pilots started training on the Bf 109 at the 36th IAP (i.e., *Iztrebitelen Aviatsionen Polk*, or Fighter Aviation Regiment, replacement of the former fighter group name (*orlyak*) with Soviet air force style terminology), at Karlovo airfield. However, they only reached the stage of basic circuits around the airfield, as they switched to flying other types afterwards, for the reason mentioned below.

At an unspecified date in mid-1950, an accident happened at Karlovo air base, involving a dual-seat Bf 109G (for details, see appropriate chapter). Soon after this incident, the Soviet-trained Major General Zahari Zahariyev decided to stop once for all the training courses on the Bf 109G, and continue with the

¹⁹⁶ The following incident involved unidentified Bulgarian fighter aircraft, although it's highly unlikely they were Bf 109Gs. Two fighters on alert intercepted and shot down an 'unidentified bomber' on 5 June 1949. It turned out that it was a Petlyakov Pe-2, which was being flown back to its base after being repaired. The bomber did not display any markings, thus could not be recognised after being intercepted. The bomber's pilot, Captain Georgi Ivanov Chobanov, escaped by chute; however, the on-board radio operator/navigator, Lieutenant Lubomir Văltchev Orachev, failed to jump and died in the wreckage. If this incident still did involve, by chance, Bf 109Gs, certainly it was the type's last 'live' combat action in Bulgaria.

¹⁹⁷ Curiously, a list of aircraft types and their engines under repair, dated 18 March 1948, that mentions all aircraft types in inventory, does not list the Bf 109G type any more.

¹⁹⁸ As mentioned earlier, the serial (board) numbers were started anew in October 1945, starting with 1.

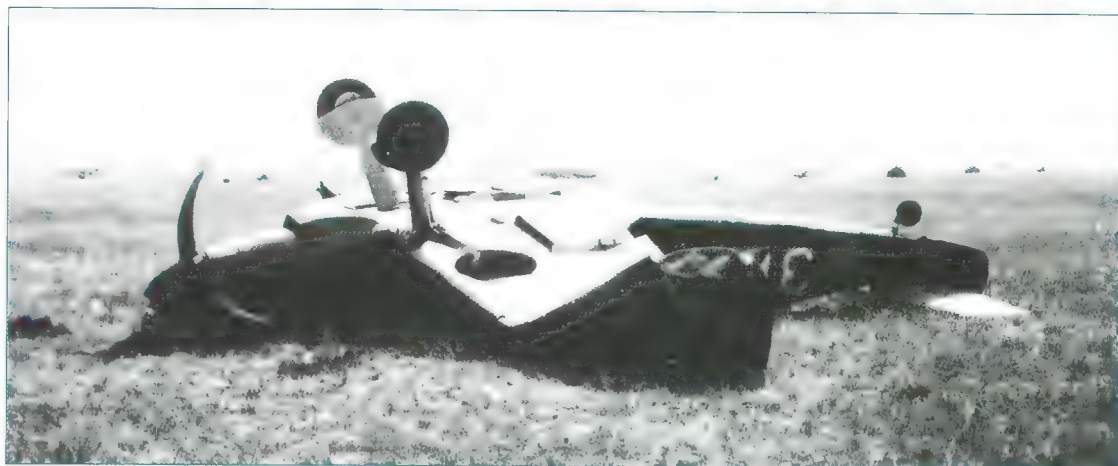


This pair of photos depicts the sole occurrence known to the Author, when a Bf 109G in Bulgarian service sports yellow rear fuselage band.

'White 3' (a G-2) somersaulted during taxiing at high speed on Bozhurishte landing ground, displaying to advantage the aforementioned yellow rear fuselage ring, lower wingtips, as well as engine cowling underside.

The photo could depict the accident that occurred on 22 September 1943, when aircraft No. 3 (no colour is given in the 3/6. Orlyak's combat diary), piloted by Podporuchik Kiril Hristov

Iliev, turned on its back during take-off. Notice the overpainted number 12 in front of the fuselage marking, denoting an ex-Luftwaffe aircraft. The propeller spinner is painted in the standard factory 1/3rd white, 2/3rd black green, without the more customary white spiral on black base colour. Another view of the same broken aircraft, seen from the rear, was published in volume 1, page 53.



Yak-9 instead, available in increasing numbers. This stark decision was also greatly influenced by the changed political climate, by then dominated by Communist ideology, unfavourable to anything that had to do with the "royalist" times¹⁹⁹. The few surviving Messerschmitts were kept in storage at Karlovo for a while, then cut into pieces in the first half of the 1950s.

Interestingly, a CIA document from the 1950s, declassified in June 2013, listing all Bulgarian airfields, mentions the following: "Marino Pole (September 1952), generally referred to as Karlovo. The 6 Air Fighter Regiment is stationed at Marino Pole airfield. Around 100 planes are based here, including Messerschmitts and planes supplied by the Soviet Union. The 6 Air Fighter Regiment is composed of four squadrons of four flights each, with 4-5 planes per flight." Another declassified CIA spy report mentions: "until the fall of 1952, the following airplanes were based at Asen airfield: (...) fifteen Soviet 'Yak-15s' [most probably Yak-9s], and German 'ME-109s'." More info from same provenance, dated September 1947: "The Bulgarian Air Force has thirty 'Me 9's' [sic!] dismantled in a field near Sliven [hard to read], but since the [spare] parts for them are not available, they will probably no longer be used."

If these Cold War-era spy reports are accurate, it means that some Bf 109s survived until the autumn of 1952, even later, possibly in unserviceable state, waiting for the wrecker's axe. This timeframe was very similar to the one of the *Strelas* handed over to Yugoslavia in 1947-1948, which were withdrawn from service in August 1952.

The scrapping action marked the sad end of the ten-year tumultuous career of the Messerschmitt *Strela G*, the main character of the most epic air battles Bulgarian летци (*lettsi*, or airmen) fought in, an aircraft type most veteran Axis fighter pilots – not only the Bulgarian ones – had a fond memory of.

Colours and Markings

All Bf 109Gs arrived in Bulgaria wearing standard *Luftwaffe* camouflage colours, consisting of RLM 74 (Greenish Dark Grey), RLM 75 (Mid-Grey) on the upper surfaces, over RLM 76 (Light Blue) on the under surfaces²⁰⁰. Occasionally, these colours were applied in camouflage schemes slightly different to

¹⁹⁹ Referring to the pre-war and wartime Kingdom of Bulgaria, and the soldiers who served in those times.

²⁰⁰ By 1943, the initial ban on painting exported aircraft in standard *Luftwaffe* camouflage 'splinter' scheme was lifted by RLM.

the standard *Luftwaffe* ones. Minor differences between various batches of aircraft that arrived in Bulgaria are due to the standards applied by individual aircraft factories at various times.

Later on, during their service time in VNVV, many *Gustavs* were applied with small, irregular blotches of very light grey over the standard *Luftwaffe* camouflage colours, on the fuselage sides and spine, as well as on the tail surface. The upper wing surfaces of some of these aircraft were also occasionally dotted in light grey. Others had their wingtips and horizontal stabiliser ends painted obliquely in the same very light grey.

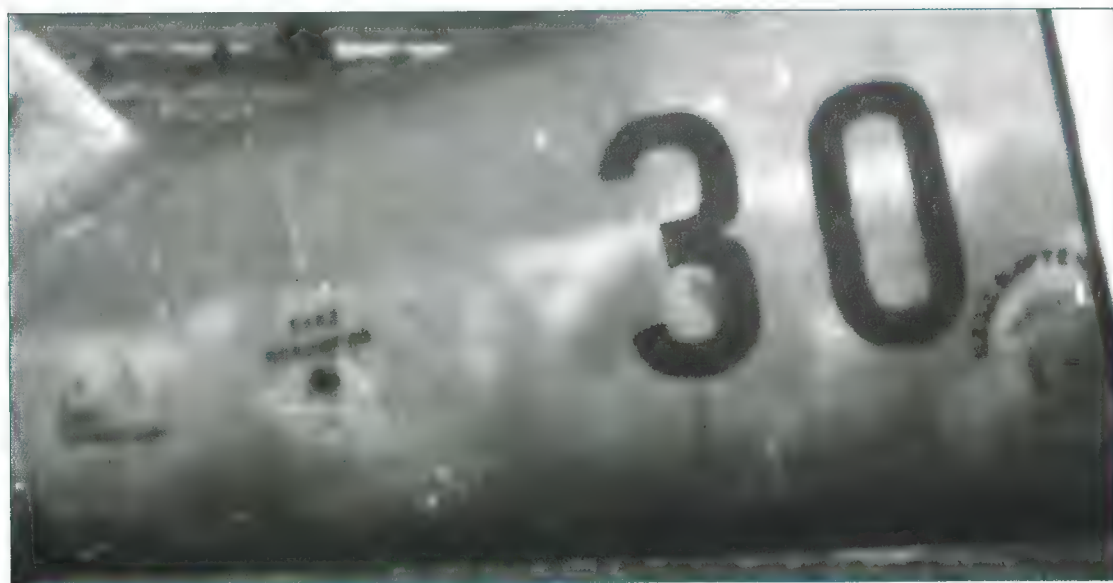
After the war, when the German origin paint and lacquer stocks had been exhausted, presumably Soviet-made camouflage paints and lacquers were employed to camouflage the repaired or overhauled warplanes. Most probably, Mid-Grey (AMT-11) and Dark Grey (AMT-12) paints were used on the upper surfaces and fuselage, while Mid-Blue (AMT-7) was applied on the undersurfaces. These Soviet-made paints were reportedly supplied in quantity for the Yak-9 fighters impressed in service from 1945²⁰¹. However, no documentary evidence supports this quite plausible theory.

Based on a couple of photographs that show freshly arrived G-2s in early 1943, the aircraft displayed the Bulgarian tricolour rudder, applied in Germany. However, these national colours on the rudder were quickly repainted after arrival with Yellow (RLM 04, or 27).

Interestingly, on that particular pair of photos the aircraft type's four-digit *Nomenklaturen Nomer* is not written on the bottom of the black triangle applied on mid-fin, only the two-digit serial number is visible on the top area! This reinforces the issue of conflicting NNs between the Avia B.135 and Bf 109G, described earlier. Eventually, inexplicably, both aircraft types received the same NN (7057) – an uncommon occurrence due presumably to sloppy bureaucracy.

There is a theory put forward by certain Bulgarian modellers to the effect that the engine cowlings and rear fuselage bands of the early Bf 109Gs were painted in line with the particular squadron's (*yato*) identification colour, namely white, red or green. This theory is based on post-war memoirs of the most famous Bulgarian wartime fighter pilot, Col. ret. Stoyan Stoyanov. He remembers that the cowlings, wingtips and rudder were painted identically to the three fighter squadron's ID colours. However, the Author found no photographic evidence – except for one particular photo of mediocre quality that apparently shows engine cowlings in different shades (see page 107, top) – that may support this theory.

As per Axis regulations, the general friendly aircraft recognition colour on the Eastern Front and vicinity, Northern Balkans included, was yellow (and white in the Mediterranean area, Africa, as well as in southern Balkans). Therefore, painting the warplanes in strikingly different identification colours would have certainly caused misidentification and unwanted 'friendly fire' occurrences. In fact the colour yellow appears on period black&white photos either rather light, or very dark, depending of the panchromatic or orthochromatic type of the negative film used. This lesser known fact may confuse the uninitiated onlooker, misleading him or her in believing that two different colours are shown on period photos, whereas it's the yellow that appears in two different shades.



Close-up detail of Bf 109G-2, 'Black 30', revealing that the service writings of this first batch of 'Strelas' were in Bulgarian language.

²⁰¹ Based on the memories of a former Bulgaria aircraft mechanic, the Yak-9s in Bulgarian service were painted on the upper surfaces and fuselage sides in "two dark grey colours, which looked slightly greenish from a distance", while the under surfaces in a sort of "medium blue" (description consistent with the AMT-11, AMT-12 and AMT-7 colours, respectively).



Not much is discernible on this photo of a Bf 109G-6, taken from 11 o'clock, except for the tall tail and belly droptank.

The military markings worn by Bulgarian Bf 109Gs were in line with the VNVV standards. For details, see chapter on Markings and Codes. When the aircraft were officially taken over, the former *Luftwaffe* markings and codes were replaced by standard Bulgarian ones. The typical VNVV triangle appeared on mid-fin, where the *Swastika* used to be, either in white over a black triangle base (on early aircraft), or in white over camouflage colour (on late arrivals).

Initially, for a short period, the early *Gustavs* were identified by two-digit black numbers. These serial (board) numbers started with 20 (continuation of the serial numbers identifying the 19 Bf 109Es, also code named *Strela*). They were applied on the rear fuselage sides, aft of the military marking, just like on their predecessor, the elder *Emils* (which had white numbers, though, to contrast to their green camouflage colour). This serial number was repeated on the wing under surfaces, in the same colour, as shown on a few photos taken from the front, or frontal sideways, where a black two-digit number (e.g., 26, 28, or 34) is visible, also in line with the practice used on *Emils*.

Later on, most probably in late July 1943 – just like the Dewoitine D.520s, the other main fighter type in late war combat service – the Bf 109Gs received coloured individual numbers (black, white, green, red, or yellow) similarly to the fighters of the *Luftwaffe Jagdverbände*. These were in the range from 1 to 16²⁰³, either outlined, or not, depending on which *yato* they belonged to. Aircraft of the fighter group's staff (*shtab*) flight were numbered 1 to 6, in yellow (outlined or not). These serial numbers were also applied aft of the fuselage marking. The *Strela*'s individual number was usually (but not always) repeated on the wing undersurfaces in the same colour. However, this practice was gradually discontinued from late 1944 on.

Colour codes of serial numbers *assumed* (by the Author) were used by the squadrons (*yato*) of the two Bf 109G-equipped fighter groups (*orlyatsi*)

- *Shtab* (2/6. *Orlyak*) = Yellow
- 642. *Yato* (2/6. *Orlyak*) = White
- 652. *Yato* (2/6. *Orlyak*) = Green
- 662. *Yato* (2/6. *Orlyak*) = Red

By carefully examining all available photographs of Bulgarian Bf 109Gs (over one hundred), it can be stated that – except for a single occurrence²⁰² – they did not wear a yellow rear fuselage band, as was customary with *Luftwaffe* and other Axis allies aircraft flying on the Eastern Front, or in the vicinity. Therefore, it was rather the exception than the rule that the yellow fuselage band was applied on VNVV '109s (usually, the pro-Allies white colour fuselage ring and wingtips, introduced in late September 1944, are mistaken by enthusiasts and artists for yellow, and are erroneously represented as such on scale models, or on colour artwork).

All Bf 109Gs (and D.520s, for that matter), had their lower wingtips painted in yellow. Former Bulgarian *Strela* fighter pilots recall that on *some* machines the upper wingtip was also painted yellow. The Author has found photographic evidence supporting this statement only at the 11th hour, on a magnificent photo of Bochev's 'Green 6' flown during the epic 1 August 1943 air battle (see page 126). Therefore, the colour artwork of the early *Gustavs*, from mid-1943, were updated accordingly. In this early period, yellow was applied only on the rounded wingtip that usually broke off when the wing hit the ground. Later, when only the lower surface was painted in yellow, the area covered was wider, about 1/7th of the wingspan, including the outer area of the aileron. It has to be noted that the light-coloured upper wingtips of some machines flown in 1944 could have been light grey, as observed on several late-war *Strelas*. This topic needs further research, particularly by observing good-quality period photos that show the upper wingtip(s).

202 In that exception, when 'White 3' is resting on its back after a taxiing accident, the clearly visible yellow rear fuselage band had most probably been applied on the previously used aircraft while in *Luftwaffe* service, and was not removed by the Bulgarians. The photo (published two pages earlier) could depict the accident that occurred on 22 September 1943, when aircraft No. 3 (no colour is given in the combat diary), piloted by *Podponuchik* Kiril Hristov Iliev, turned on its back during take-off.

203 For example, 672. *Yato* had 16 serviceable Bf 109G-2s on 10 October 1943, Nos. 1-16.



This derelict Bf 109G lies nearby a narrow-gauge railway track sometime after the end of the war. Two interesting details can be observed: the light grey squiggles sprayed over the original two-tone camouflage colours and the number 7 on the port wing underside, which was clearly not black. This detail reinforces the Author's previous statement in effect that the fuselage serial (board) number was repeated on the lower wing surfaces in the same shape and colour. Despite prolonged efforts by the original photo's owner, Ted Muchovski, the location of this photo could not (yet) be identified.

- *Shtab* (3/6. *Orlyak*) = Yellow (outlined)
- 672. *Yato* (3/6. *Orlyak*) = White (outlined)
- 682. *Yato* (3/6. *Orlyak*) = Green (outlined)
- 692. *Yato* (3/6. *Orlyak*) = Red (outlined)

Note: the usage of black serial (board) numbers – proven by photos and pilot's logbook entries – could not yet be fully explained. The logical explanation would be that those aircraft belonged to a fourth *yato*. However, only one German document, an Order of Battle dated 9 March 1944, lists a fourth *yato* within an *orlyak*; therefore, its existence is improbable.

To distinguish between different squadrons (*yato*) using the same colour serial (board) numbers, the fuselage numbers used by a particular group (*orlyak*) were either outlined with a thin coloured line, or not outlined. The Author speculates that the colour of the fuselage number's outline (possibly white, green and red) may have been linked to a particular *orlyak*, but there is no proof of this theory.

It appears that aircraft of 2/6. *Orlyak* had non-outlined coloured numbers, while the ones of 3/6. *Orlyak* had outlined coloured numbers. The only documented proof regarding the link between the units and numbering style are the very few photos that show aircraft of known people, or units. For example, in mid-1943 the personal aircraft of *Poruchik* Stoyan Stoyanov, commanding officer of 682. *Yato*, part of 3/6. *Orlyak*, Bf 109G-2, 20/7057, was Green 1, outlined in white. Other photos showing Bf 109G-2s of the first batch, known to be assigned to 682. *Yato*, also depict green numbers outlined in white. By contrast, *Podporuchik* Marinopolski, member of 652. *Yato*, 2/6. *Orlyak*, usually flew in July-August 1944 'Green 6', which was applied without any outline. It has to be noted that this is in contradiction to the system described in the D.520 chapter as particular to aircraft of 2/6. *Orlyak*; however, it's plausible that different numbering systems were valid for different types of fighter aircraft.

All stencils of the first batch of Bf 109Gs delivered in early 1943 were in Bulgarian, applied in black Cyrillic letters [see photo on page 109]. Later on, when the pace of aircraft deliveries increased, the standard German language stencilling was left on the airframe. After the war, when the surviving aircraft were repaired and overhauled, Bulgarian language text was applied on the aircraft.

On most *Strela* photos, a wide, white spiral can be observed on black painted spinner. Based on *Luftwaffe* regulation, this distinctive Axis recognition marking was introduced on German (and Axis allied) aircraft subordinated to *Luftflotte* 4 fighting on the Eastern Front, in late July 1944, while on the 'Invasionsfront' (western Europe) a month earlier. However, a photo of a Bulgarian Bf 109G tucked in a hangar, taken in late September 1943, identified by the black bands the pilots wear on their left sleeves due to the passing of Tsar Boris, clearly shows the wide white spiral on the spinner (see page 9, bottom). This places the date of introduction of the white spiral much earlier than the *Luftwaffe* regulation stipulates, namely to September 1943. It may have been introduced in connection with the possibility of Allied bombing raids of mainland Europe, coming through the Balkans, following the epic 'Tidal Wave' Operation against the oilfields at Ploesti, Rumania, on 1 August 1943. This theory is reinforced by the fact that there are photos of *Luftwaffe* Bf 109G-6s stationed in Italy and Greece (notably 12./JG 27) in

the summer of 1943, which clearly sport white spirals on black spinners, albeit narrower than displayed on their Bulgarian ally's *Gustavs*.

Very rarely, Bulgarian fighter pilots had their own individual markings or emblems applied on their personal mounts. One such documented case is the aforementioned Bf 109G-6 of *Podporuchik* Stefan Marinopolski of 652. *Yato*, 2/6. *Orlyak*, 'Green 6' without outline, where a simplified lioness's (or wild-cat's) head emblem was applied on the cowling, and the woman's name HELGA written underneath the cockpit, interestingly with Latin letters (see appropriate colour profile)! Another emblem seen on a Bf 109G-6, believed to be flown by *Podporuchik* Hristo I. Petrov of 2/6. *Orlyak*, depicts a running black wild boar in a green shield (see volume 1, page 60). Again, it's uncertain if this was a unit, or an individual emblem; however, the latter possibility is more plausible.

Based on the couple of available photographs of the so-called 'trophy' (ex-*Luftwaffe*, or ex-MKHL) Bf 109Gs flown out from Austria after the war's end, the former Axis markings were overpainted with large grey squares and rectangles; however, the Axis yellow nose band and rudder were left untouched. Some brand-new units arrived in Bulgaria in bare metal factory finish. Others, transported by rail, kept their full former Axis markings and codes. All these were soon replaced by standard VV markings.

A significant number of Bf 109Gs soldiered on long enough to receive the so-called 'OF-type' Republican marking, introduced in early October 1945. It was applied on the fuselage sides and the wing under surfaces only. By then, the pro-Allies white fuselage band and wingtips had disappeared. The spinner was (at least officially) painted in three versions: red, light blue, or yellow, as per the official instructions issued on 21 September 1945: "To identify the different aircraft with the same board numbers from various *orlyatsi*, the propeller blades [sic! actually the spinner, D.B.] have to be painted, as follows:

- in the first *orlyatsi* (1/6., 1/2., 1/5.) bright red,
- in the second *orlyatsi* (2/6., 2/2., 2/5.) light blue,
- in the third *orlyatsi* (3/6., 3/2.) yellow."

At the same time, the coloured individual fuselage numbers gave way to white ones, applied this time in front of the marking. They were assigned in the range of 1 to 40, in white, as per the official instructions mentioned above. This time, the number was not repeated on the wing under surface.

The instruction ordered the following redistribution of fuselage numbers for aircraft of the fighter regiment (*polk*):

- 1/6. *Orlyak*, based at Bozhurishte, from 1 to 40,
- 2/6. *Orlyak*, based at Balchik, from 1 to 40,
- 3/2. [sic!, actually 3/6.] *Orlyak* (the only *orlyak* equipped at that time with the Bf 109G), based at Gorna Oryahovitsa, from 1 to 40.

As for the distribution of these number within an *orlyak*, the following instructions were given:

- a, from 1 to 4: staff *krilo* and reserve
- b, from 5 to 16: 1st *yato*
- c, from 17 to 28: 2nd *yato*
- d, from 29 to 40: 3rd *yato*

These instructions had to be implemented by 6 October 1945.

The Bulgarian tricolour was painted in thin horizontal stripes across the entire tail surface. As a consequence, the typical Bulgarian triangle, applied in white, moved to underneath the horizontal stabiliser. The upper digit inscribed in the triangle was now identical to the fuselage number.

This particular national marking was worn until about 1951, when it gave way to the red star type markings with the Bulgarian cockade in centre. This military marking style was used by several pro-Soviet Central and east European air forces, those which had fought on Germany's side during the war. Only a very few, if any, Bf 109s received this Communist style marking – no photographic evidence surfaced so far, only is mentioned in pilots' memoirs²⁰⁴ and illustrated on unreliable colour drawings.



<http://mmpbooks.biz/assets/BFC/2-01.pdf>

204 Former pilot Maj. Boris Petkov recalls his military service at Karlovo in the early 1950s, after graduating the one-year training course at Lipetsk, USSR: "At first, for one, or two months, I was named commander of [an unspecified] 'flying unit', with the task to teach students to fly the Me-109. At Karlovo, we had mainly aircraft captured in Austria. I flew the most modern Messerschmitts. Maybe we had also some '109Ks, but I cannot say for sure. The aircraft were painted in camouflage colors and wore our stars (underline mine, D.B.)."

Annex 1

Overview of Bf 109G deliveries to Bulgaria, Preparedness of Bulgarian Fighter Pilots and Their Training Status [Approximate translation from German (original document partly illegible)]

German Legation
The Air Attaché
Doc. No. 547/44 Secret
Sofia, 12.7.1944

1, Preparedness of the Bulgarian fighter force (2.7.1944)

| | |
|---|---|
| Delivered: | 36 G-2 (1943) 23 G-2 + 82 G-6 (1944) |
| | ----- |
| | 59 G-2 + 82 G-6 |
| (...) In total: | 141 Bf 109 G |
| Total losses: | 39 Bf 109 G |
| | ----- |
| | 102 Bf 109 G |
| (...) Repair with damage between 85%-15%: | 71 |
| With damage under 15%: | 10 |
| | ----- |
| | 81 |
| (...) available at units: | 21 Bf 109 G |
| (...) short term unserviceable at units: | 10 |
| Airworthy (combat ready) at units: | 11 Bf 109 G |
| (Note: 11 airworthy aircraft is 10.8% of the actual stock and 7.8% the total number delivered). | |

2, Continuation of the training of Bulgarian fighter pilots

After Karlovo airfield has been eliminated by enemy bomb attacks, the following proposals have been submitted to the Bulgarian Air Force for the continuation of the fighter defence.

- relocation of the II./JG 6¹ to the German airfield of Sliven. There, training and refreshing courses to be held with the aim of performing missions in group formation.
- relocation of the I./JG 6 to Sliven. Operational conversion of the pilots on Bf 109 G-2, depending on aircraft availability.
- the Fighter Training Command of the German Air Force Mission to Bulgaria also relocates to Sliven.
- the Air Attaché had suggested the creation of a training squadron. Instead, the establishment of a training group from IV./JG 6 is now regarded as feasible. This training group should consist of three squadrons, of which one would be held active as an employment staple on the necessary training. The task of the supplementary group is training in formation flight, on squad and squadron level.
- in accordance to an application submitted to the High Command of the Royal Bulgarian Air Force, the German training officer, Major Kühle, to involve more disciplinarily [i.e., with disciplinary attributes] in the training of Bulgarian fighter pilots, in order to exert pressure in the future that training and readiness would no longer be endangered by aviation indiscipline and negligence [by Bulgarian pilots].

(...)

4, Airplane Technical School

The airplane technical school, which was established by the Germans under the command of *Oberstabsingenieur* Schäfer, suffered 60% destruction by bomb attacks and was transferred to Karlovo School of Engineers. Training groups are constantly employed on the airfields.

Signed: Count Schönborn



A pilot called 'Gosho' (nick-name of Georgi, i.e., George) lies against a 'Strela' parked on Aprilovo landing ground, post-war. By this time, the former Axis recognition marking of white spiral on black spinner had been overpainted in entirely white. The airframe also received a new paintjob, typical of Bulgarian-flown '109s. On the bottom of the print "Meserschmitt-109" is written.

¹ It actually refers to the Bulgarian 2nd Orlyak (Gruppe) of the 6th Iztrebitelen Polk (Jagdgeschwader), or 2/6 in Bulgarian terminology. Same is valid for other units mentioned later.

Annex 2

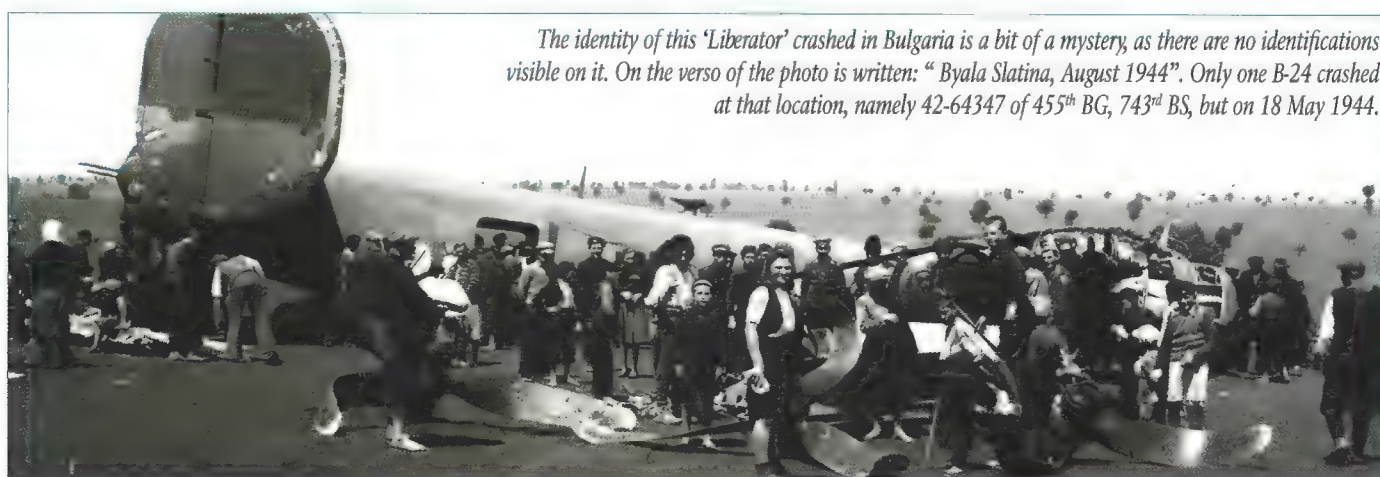
List of Bf 109E and G pilots' air victory claims and awarded points (1943-1944) – compiled by Dénes Bernád

| Last, First, Middle Initial Name | Rank | Unit (<i>Orlyak</i>) | Date | Victory Claim Destroyed | Victory Claim Damaged | Victory Points | Notes |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Stoyanov, Stoyan I. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 1.08.1943 | B-24 | B-24 | 3+2 | |
| Bonev, Ivan N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 1.08.1943 | B-24 | B-24 | 3+2 | |
| Bochev, Petăr A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 1.08.1943 | B-24 | - | 3 | |
| Krăstev, Hristo G. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 1.08.1943 | B-24 | - | 3 | |
| Grigorov, Mihail G. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 21.10.1943 | P-38 | - | 1 | Flying on Bf 109E |
| Yordanov, Nikolay G. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 14.11.1943 | - | B-25 | 1 | |
| Bochev, Petăr A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 14.11.1943 | - | B-25 | 1 | |
| Petkovski, Aleksandăr A. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 14.11.1943 | - | B-25* | 1 | *3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> Diary identifies it as P-38 |
| Bochev, Petăr A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 14.11.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | Based on the 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> Combat Diary. NIOVL |
| Kralichev, Nikola H. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 14.11.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | Based on the 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> Diary. NIOVL |
| Grigorov, Mihail G. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 14.11.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | Flying on Bf 109E |
| Toplodolski, Chudomir M. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 3/6 | 24.11.1943 | B-24* | B-24 | 3+2 | *3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> Diary identifies it as P-38 |
| Koev, Hristo T. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 24.11.1943 | B-24 | - | 3 | |
| Stoyanov, Stoyan I. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.11.1943 | - | B-24 | 2 | Same aircraft as above |
| Grigorov, Mihail G. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.11.1943 | - | B-24 | 2 | Flying on Bf 109E |
| Konzov, Stefan D. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 24.11.1944 | - | B-24 | 0 | Based on the 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> Diary. NIOVL |
| Uzunov, Mihail T. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.11.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Iliev, Kiril H. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.11.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | NIOVL |
| Kralichev, Nikola H. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 24.11.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Kondakov, Lyuben Z. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Petkovski, Aleksandăr A. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Toplodolski, Chudomir M. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 3/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Stoyanov, Stoyan I. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Iliev, Kiril H. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Uzunov, Mihail T. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Tsvëtkov, Marin A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Ivanov, Gencho D. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 20.12.1943 | B-24 | B-24 | 3+2 | |
| Spisarevski, Dimităr S. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 20.12.1943 | B-24 | - | 3 | Ramming, KIA |
| Stoyanov, Stoyan I. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 20.12.1943 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Petkovski, Aleksandăr A. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 20.12.1943 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Kyumyurdzhiev, Georgi R. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 20.12.1943 | P-38* | B-24 | 1+2 | KIA. *In many sources, the P-38 'kill' is not mentioned |
| Toplodolski, Chudomir M. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 3/6 | 20.12.1943 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Yordanov, Nikolay G. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 20.12.1943 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Koev, Hristo T. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 20.12.1943 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Tsvëtkov, Marin A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 20.12.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Zagorski, Tsviatko M. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 2 | |
| Toplodolski, Chudomir M. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 3/6 | 10.01.1944 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Ivanov, Gencho D. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 10.01.1944 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Stoyanov, Stoyan I. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 10.01.1944 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Konzov, Stefan D. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Koev, Hristo T. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Stanushev, Stanush D. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Kostakev, Hristo V. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 30.03.1944 | B-17 x 2 | - | 6 | Highest no. of victory points awarded in a single sortie. Crash landed |
| Bonchev, Nedëlcho D. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 30.03.1944 | B-17 | - | 3 | |
| Atanasov, Viktor D. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 30.03.1944 | B-17 | - | 3 | |

| | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|-----|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|----|--|
| Ivanov, Gencho D. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 30.03.1944 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Kondakov, Lyuben Z. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | B-17 | 2 | |
| Boshnakov, Nikola S. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 2 | |
| Petrov, Hristo I. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 2 | |
| Damev, Boris V. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | B-17 | 2 | Attacked as <i>troyka</i> a formation of 3 'Fortresses'. Shared victories |
| Tsvetkov, Marin A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | B-17 | 2 | |
| Grigorov, Mihail G. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | B-17 | 2 | |
| Stefanov, Ivan T. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 1 | Shared victory |
| Gruev, Tsvetan D. | <i>Feldfebel shkolnik</i> | 3/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | | 1 | |
| Group | N/A | 3/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 2 | Shared victory of the whole <i>orlyak</i> . Unique occurrence |
| Terziev, Veselin S. | <i>Kandidat ofitser</i> | 2/6 | 5.04.1944* | 4-engine bomber | - | 3 | *Date erroneously given by the official list as 9 April. Victory not listed in the diary |
| Terziev, Veselin S. | <i>Kandidat ofitser</i> | 2/6 | 5.04.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | Shared claim. NIOVL |
| Kolev, Georgi I. | <i>Podofitser</i> | 2/6 | 5.04.1944 | - | | 0 | |
| Ivanov, Gencho D. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 5.04.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Banov, Mihail K. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 5.04.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | NIOVL |
| Bonchev, Nedelcho D. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 17.04.1944 | 'Fortress' | - | 3 | Rammed, bailed out |
| Boshnakov, Nikolay S. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 2/6 | 17.04.1944 | - | 'Fortress'* | 2 | *All 'Fortresses' claimed that day were B-24s |
| Kovachev, Asen D. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 17.04.1944 | - | 'Fortress' | 2 | |
| Yordanov, Nikolay G. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 17.04.1944 | - | 'Fortress' | 2 | |
| Aleksandrov, Vladimir A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 17.04.1944 | - | 'Fortress' | 2 | |
| Dakov, Dako P. | <i>Feldfebel shkolnik</i> | 3/6 | 17.04.1944* | - | 'Fortress' | 2 | *Date listed erroneously in the official list as 17 January |
| Stoyanov, Nayden P. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 17.04.1944 | - | P-47* | 0 | *Misidentification of a P-51 |
| Gogov, Nayden H. | <i>Podofitser</i> | 2/6 | 17.04.1944 | - | P-47* | 0 | Same aircraft as above. NIOVL |
| Tonchev, Evgheni G. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 18.05.1944 | 4-engine bomber | - | 3 | |
| Bonev, Ivan N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 18.05.1944 | B-24 | - | 2* | Shared victory (*officially listed with 3 points) |
| Dakov, Dako P. | <i>Feldfebel shkolnik</i> | 3/6 | 18.05.1944 | | - | 1 | |
| Rozev, Todor N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 11.06.1944 | B-24 | - | 3 | |
| Tsvetkov, Marin A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 11.06.1944 | B-24 | - | 3 | |
| Bonev, Ivan N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 11.06.1944 | P-51 | - | 1 | KIA |
| Stoyanov, Stoyan I. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 23.06.1944 | B-24 | - | 3 | |
| Damev, Boris V. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 23.06.1944 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Tonchev, Evgheni G. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 23.06.1944 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Hristov, Toshko I. | <i>Podofitser</i> | 3/6 | 23.06.1944 | - | B-24 | 1 | |
| Kovachev, Asen D. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 23.06.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 0 | Based on the 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> Combat Diary. NIOVL |
| Kirov (same as Petrov?) | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 23.06.1944 | - | | 0 | |
| Petrov, Petăr K. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 23.06.1944 | - | | 0 | |
| Barev, Anton I. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 23.06.1944 | - | | 0 | |
| Petrov, Petăr K. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 24.06.1944 | 4-engine bomber | - | 3 | |
| Zagorski, Tsviatko M. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 24.06.1944 | 4-engine bomber | - | 3 | KIA |
| Rozev, Todor N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.06.1944 | | - | 0 | Rozev claims that he finished off the bomber (NIOVL). Himself shot down, bailed out |
| Stoyanov, Stoyan I. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.06.1944 | 'Fortress' | - | 1 | Shared victory |
| Uzunov, Mihail T. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.06.1944 | | - | 1 | |
| Stoyanov, Kiril H. | <i>Kandidat podofitser</i> | 3/6 | 24.06.1944 | | - | 1 | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-----|------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----|---|
| Damev, Boris V. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.06.1944 | 4-engine bomber | - | 1 | Shared victory. Rozev claims in his memoirs that he was also part of the 'kill' (NIOVL) |
| Tsvetkov, Marin A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.06.1944 | | - | 1 | |
| Kamenov, Yoto P. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 24.06.1944 | | - | 1 | |
| Rozev, Todor N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 24.06.1944 | | - | 0 | |
| Kostakev, Hristo V. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 15.07.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 0 | |
| Bochev, Petăr A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 22.07.1944 | 4-engine bomber | - | 3 | |
| Tsvetkov, Marin A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 22.07.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 2 | |
| Toplodolski, Chudomir M. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 3/6 | 22.07.1944 | 4-engine bomber | - | 1 | Shared victory |
| Somov, Dimităr R. | <i>Podofitser</i> | 3/6 | 22.07.1944 | | - | 1 | |
| Kralichev, Nikola H. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 22.07.1944 | | - | 1 | |
| Atanasov, Krăstyu A. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 3/6 | 10.08.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 1* | Shared victory (*also listed with 2 victory points) |
| Bochev, Petăr A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 10.08.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 1 | |
| Bochev, Petăr A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 10.08.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 1 | Shared victory |
| Petkovski, Aleksandăr A. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 10.08.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 1 | |
| Konzov, Stefan D. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 3/6 | 10.08.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 1 | |
| Bochev, Petăr A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 17.08.1944 | B-24 | - | 3 | |
| Atanasov, Krăstyu A. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 3/6 | 17.08.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 2 | |
| Damev, Boris V. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 17.08.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 2 | |
| Nikolov, Nikola V. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 17.08.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 2 | Name given as Nikola P. Vălchev in official protocol |
| Manolev, Petăr D. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 17.08.1944 | - | 4-engine bomber | 2 | Last name erroneously written as Manolov |
| Tsvetkov, Marin A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 17.08.1944 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Stoyanov, Kiril H. | <i>Kandidat podofitser</i> | 3/6 | 17.08.1944 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Stoyanov, Stoyan I. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 3/6 | 26.08.1944 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Atanasov, Krăstyu A. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 3/6 | 26.08.1944 | 4-engine bomber | - | 1 | Shared victory |
| Bochev, Petăr A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 26.08.1944 | | - | 1 | |
| Takov, Nikola P. | <i>Podofitser</i> | 3/6 | 26.08.1944 | | - | 1 | |
| Sotirov, Dimităr D. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 26.08.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | NIOVL |
| Georgiev, Georgi A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 26.08.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Stoyanov, Kiril H. | <i>Kandidat podofitser</i> | 3/6 | 26.08.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Rozev, Todor N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 3/6 | 26.08.1944 | - | P-51 | 0 | As described in his memoirs. NIOVL |
| Total aircraft claimed (victory points given) | | | | 38 | 41 | 169 | |

Note: NIOVL means Not Included in the Official Victory List; KIA means Killed In Action



Annex 3

List of individual Bf 109G losses, accidents and write-offs (reconstruction by Dénes Bernád)

| S/N | W.Nr. | Engine | Photo | Unit/Date | Damaged | Destroyed | WFU | Notes |
|-----|-------|-----------------|-------|--|-------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|---|
| 20 | 14793 | 78475 | Yes | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 28.10.1946 | 'Green 1' Machine of <i>Por.</i> Stoyan Stoyanov |
| 21 | 14791 | 78471 | | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 28.10.1946 | 'Green 2' |
| 22 | 14732 | 78524 | Yes | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 28.10.1946 | 'Green 3' |
| 23 | 14792 | 76321 78269 | | 682. Yato/1943 | 01.08.1943 | | 23.08.1944, 28.10.1946 | G-2, manufactured by WNF in 1942. 'Green 4' of <i>Ppor.</i> Krăstev. 50% damage. Sent to ASAM Pipera (Rumania) for repair. Currently displayed in the Belgrade aviation museum in Yugoslav A.F. colours |
| 24 | 14742 | 78465 | Yes | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 12.06.1944 | 'Green 5'. |
| 25 | 14789 | 36374 | | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 23.08.1944 | 'Green 6'. Damaged in air combat on 1.08.1943. Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev on 16 June 1945 (!) |
| 26 | 14788 | 27492 36202 | Yes | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 25.08.1944 | 'Green 7', damaged in air combat on 1.08.1943 |
| 27 | 14794 | 78406 | | 682. Yato/1943 and 22.07.1944 and 19.03.1945 | 5.10.1944 and 29 (19).03.1945 | | 28.10.1946 | 'Green 8'. Repeatedly flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Marinopolski in Sept. 1944 |
| 28 | 14790 | 78371 | Yes | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 28.10.1946 | 'Green 9' |
| 29 | 14796 | 36290 | Yes | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 28.10.1946 | 'Green 10' |
| 30 | 14785 | 78439 | Yes | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 01.08.1944 | 'Green 11' |
| 31 | 14786 | 78619 | | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 25.08.1944 | 'Green 12' |
| 32 | 14733 | 36387 | | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 28.10.1946 | 'Green 13' |
| 33 | 14737 | 78402 | | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 23.08.1944 | 'Green 14' |
| 34 | 14797 | 36193 | Yes | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 25.08.1944 | 'Green 15' |
| 35 | 14795 | 26268 | | 682. Yato/1943 | | | 23.08.1944 | 'Green 16' |
| 36 | 13517 | 26754, 25718 | Yes | 672. Yato 19.07.1943 | 19.07.1943 | | 01.08.1944 | G-2. Pilot <i>Por.</i> Nikolay Yordanov accident during landing on 19.07.1943. Sent to ASAM Pipera for repair. |
| 37 | 13546 | 26610 | | | | | 01.08.1944 | G-2 |
| 38 | 14803 | 35670 | Yes | 672. Yato 09.08.1943 | | 09.08.1943 | | G-2. Crashed near Pirdop, pilot <i>Ppor.</i> Luka Obreykov (KIFA). Last confirmed W.Nr. and S/N link |
| 39 | | | | | | | 22.02.1946 | |
| 40 | | | | | | | 23.08.1944 | |
| 42 | | | | | | | 28.10.1946 | G-2 |
| 43 | | | | | | | 23.08.1944 | |
| 44 | | | | 2/6. Orlyak 28.06.1944 | | 28.06.1944 | 29.06.1944 | G-2. Destroyed during bombing of Karlovo a/f |
| 45 | | | | | | | 28.10.1946 | G-2 |
| 46 | | | | | | | 01.08.1944 | |
| 47 | 14710 | 25691 | | | | | 20.12.1943, 1.08.1944 | G-2. Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 48 | | | | | | | 01.08.1944 | |
| 49 | | | | | | | 23.08.1944 | |
| 50 | | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-2. See note (at bottom) |
| 51 | | | | | | | 01.08.1944 | |
| 52 | | | | | | | 28.10.1946 | G-2 |
| 53 | | | | | | | 28.10.1946 | G-2 |
| 54 | 14816 | 78597 | | | | | 20.12.1943 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 55 | | | | | | | 26.11.1946 | |
| 56 | | | | | | | 28.12.1945 | |
| 57 | | | | | | | 26.03.1946 | |
| 58 | | | | | | | 26.11.1946 | |
| 59 | | | | | | | 25.08.1944 | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev on 30 July 1945 |
| 60 | | | | | | | 23.08.1944 | |
| 61 | | | | | 12.08.1944 2/6. Orlyak | | 18.10.1946 | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----|--------|-----------|-----|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|------------|---|
| 62 | | | | | | | 11.12.1945 | |
| 63 | | | | | | | 26.11.1946 | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev on 17 Oct. 1945 |
| 64 | 161461 | 702474 | | | | | 20.04.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 65 | 161472 | 100327 | | | | | 26.11.1946 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 66 | 161473 | 00701719 | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-2. See note (at bottom). Airframe W.Nr. presumed |
| 67 | | | | | | | 25.08.1944 | |
| 68 | | | | | 11.08.1944 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | | | |
| 69 | | | | | | | 01.08.1944 | |
| 71 | | | | | | | 28.12.1945 | Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Viktor Atanasov in March 1944. On 08.09.1944, gunsight stolen by German soldiers on Vrazhdebna |
| 72 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 73 | | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom) |
| 74 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 75 | | | Yes | | | | 26.11.1946 | G-6. White 2 |
| 76 | | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom). |
| 77 | | | | 17.04.1944 652. <i>Yato</i> | | 17.04.1944 | 21.11.1944 | G-6 |
| 78 | | | | | | | 25.08.1944 | |
| 79 | | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom). On 08.09.1944, gunsight stolen by German soldiers on Vrazhdebna |
| 81 | | | | | | | 26.11.1946 | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev on 30 Aug. 1945 |
| 82 | | | | | | | 21.11.1944 | |
| 83 | | | | | | | 23.08.1944 | |
| 84 | | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-2. See note (at bottom) |
| 85 | | | | | | | 26.11.1946 | |
| 86 | | | Yes | | | | 26.11.1946 | G-2 |
| 87 | | | | | | | 26.11.1946 | |
| 88 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 89 | | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-2. See note (at bottom) |
| 90 | | | | | | | 21.11.1944 | |
| 91 | | 76759 | | | | | 25.08.1944 | |
| 92 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 93 | | | | | | | 21.11.1944 | |
| 94 | | | Yes | | | | 29.06.1944 | Destroyed during the bombing of Karlovo a/f? |
| 96 | | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom) |
| 97 | | | | | | | 26.11.1946 | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev on 17 Oct. 1945 |
| 99 | | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Stefan Marinopolski on 9.06.1944. See note (at bottom) |
| 100 | 162330 | 01102628 | | | | | 24.10.1944 | Flown either by <i>Por.</i> Kiril Andonov (KIA), or by <i>Ppor.</i> Georgi Georgiev (POW), both lost on 23.10.1944. Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 101 | 162416 | 00703148 | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom). Airframe W.Nr. presumed |
| 102 | 162419 | 00703289 | | | | 11.04.1945 | 4.09.1945 | Mid-air collision with No. 166. W.Nr. presumed |
| 103 | 162480 | 01901540 | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom). Airframe W.Nr. presumed |
| 104 | 162516 | 01101869 | | | | | 1.08.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 105 | 162520 | 00702830 | | | | | 05.05.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 106 | 162524 | 00201297 | | | | | 21.11.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 107 | 162527 | 00201174 | | | | | 21.11.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 108 | 162540 | 00702812 | | | | | | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 109 | 162543 | 00702844 | | | 14.06.1945 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | | | On 14.06.1945 belly landed on Sliven, slight damage. Pilot <i>Por.</i> Nikola Nikolov. Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 110 | 162561 | 00201953 | | | | | 13.06.1946 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 111 | 162472 | 001101584 | | | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> 9.09.1944 | | 23.03.1947 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 112 | 162702 | 00200613 | | | | | 23.03.1947 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |

| | | | | | | | |
|-----|------------|----------|-----|---------------------------------------|------------|------------|---|
| 113 | 162703 | 00200010 | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom). Airframe W.Nr. presumed |
| 114 | 162719 | 00703921 | | | | 23.03.1947 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 115 | 161058 | 1900378 | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom). Airframe W.Nr. presumed |
| 116 | 162685 | 00703099 | | | | 1.08.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 117 | 163321 | 11211196 | | | | | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 118 | 163323 | 01901005 | | | | 21.11.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 119 | 163318 | 00704951 | | | | 1.08.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 120 | 162992 | 00201601 | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom). Airframe W.Nr. presumed |
| 121 | 163010 | 00201583 | | | | 23.10.1944 | See note (at bottom). Airframe W.Nr. presumed only |
| 122 | 163012 | 00202107 | | | 20.05.1944 | 23.10.1944 | G-6. Assigned to 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> . Destroyed in crash. Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 123 | 163013 | 01900714 | | | | 1.08.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 124 | 162698 | 01900579 | | | | 1.08.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 125 | 163322 | 00704942 | | | 18.11.1944 | 21.11.1944 | G-6. Last combat loss. Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 126 | 162482 | 100392 | | | | | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 127 | | | Yes | | | 4.12.1945 | |
| 128 | | | | 672. <i>Yato</i> 2.06.1945 | | | Propeller blades bent during takeoff by <i>Ppor.</i> Mihail Uzunov |
| 130 | | | | | | 25.08.1944 | Possibly <i>Ppor.</i> Todor Rozev's mount, shot down |
| 132 | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom) |
| 133 | | | Yes | | | | G-6, 'Green 1' (outlined in white) in late 1944 |
| 136 | | | | | | 18.10.1946 | Repaired at Bozhurishte in Nov. 1945 |
| 137 | | | | | | | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev on 6 June 1945 |
| 139 | | | | | | 25.08.1944 | |
| 140 | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom) |
| 141 | | | | | | 4.12.1945 | |
| 142 | | | Yes | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> 29 (19).03.1945 | | 27.04.1945 | G-6, 'Red 7'. Tall tail |
| 143 | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom) |
| 144 | | | | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> 11.10.1944 | | | Piloted by <i>Por.</i> Boris V. Damev |
| 145 | 760221 | 00400127 | | | | 25.08.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 147 | | | | | | 23.03.1947 | |
| 148 | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | |
| 149 | 760239 | 00400282 | | | | 11.06.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 150 | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom) |
| 151 | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom) |
| 152 | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom) |
| 154 | [See note] | 760242 | | | | 12.06.1944 | G-6. Document gives 760242 as engine W.Nr., but most likely it's the airframe W.Nr., built at MWG-Győr, Hungary (engines fitted to MWG-made '109s were in the 00400xxx series, built by Dunai Repülőgépgyár Rt., Csepel, Hungary, factory code 'kwn') |
| 155 | 760244 | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom). Airframe W.Nr. presumed |
| 156 | 760245 | 00400273 | | | | 24.10.1944 | Flown either by <i>Por.</i> Kiril Andonov (KIA), or by <i>Ppor.</i> Georgi Georgiev (POW), both lost on 23.10.1944. Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 157 | | | | | | 23.10.1944 | G-6. See note (at bottom) |
| 159 | | 37054 | | | | 29.06.1944 | G-6. Destroyed during the bombing of Karlovo |
| 160 | | | | | | 4.12.1945 | |
| 161 | 162508 | 00201308 | | | | | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 162 | 166017 | 702072 | | | 5.10.1944 | 5.10.1944 | <i>Ppor.</i> Petăr Bochev KIA. Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 163 | 166089 | 00701369 | | | 22.09.1944 | 22.09.1944 | <i>Ppor.</i> Dimităr Sotirov KIA. Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 164 | 166098 | 01102618 | | | | 23.03.1947 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 165 | 166105 | 00708661 | | | | 9.09.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 166 | 166110* | 00709076 | | | 11.04.1945 | 4.09.1945 | Mid-air collision with No. 102 *also listed 166109 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----|--------|----------|--|--|-------------------------|------------|------------|--|
| 167 | 166112 | 00708651 | | | | | | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 168 | 166113 | 36475 | | | | | 09.09.1945 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 169 | 166116 | 01104780 | | | | | | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 170 | 166119 | 77069 | | | 692. Yato 22.05.1945 | | | Both undercarriage legs broke during a sharp turn to the left while taking off by <i>Por.</i> Evgheni Tonchev |
| 171 | 166122 | 00702823 | | | | | 23.03.1947 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 172 | 166095 | 36011 | | | | 17.09.1944 | 28.09.1944 | Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Stefan Marinopolski on 3.08.1944. <i>Kpt.</i> Marin Petrov, hit by flak, crashed, pilot hit the silk |
| 173 | 166103 | 26101 | | | | | 30.09.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 174 | 166140 | 00204994 | | | | | | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 175 | 166148 | 36387 | | | | 5.10.1944 | 06.10.1944 | Airframe W.Nr. presumed from link to engine W.Nr. |
| 176 | 166150 | 78342 | | | | | 16.08.1944 | Direct link between S/N, airframe, engine W.Nr. confirmed |
| 177 | 166152 | 00702898 | | | | | | Last Bf 109G handed over by the Germans? |
| 178 | | | | | | | | Flown by Petăr Manolev in July-Oct. 1945 (Trophy)? |
| 180 | | | | | | | 23.03.1947 | |
| 181 | | | | | | | 23.03.1947 | |
| 182 | | | | | | | 23.03.1947 | Flown by Petăr Manolev on 20 July 1945 (Trophy) |
| 192 | | | | | | | 23.03.1947 | Highest number found in the archives (Trophy) |
| 270 | | | | | | | | Theoretical highest serial number (unconfirmed) |

Note: In early September 1944, Bulgarian personnel had to abandon 23 'Strelas' at the Aviation Repair Shop at Skopje, due to hasty retreat in front of the now hostile German troops present there. An equal number of 'Strelas' were officially written off on 23 October 1944, which must have been the same aircraft. This event was the highest one-day loss of Bf 109Gs in Bulgarian service.

Note: Only those aircraft are listed where there is any information available about them.

Annex 4

List of Bf 109Gs identified with renumbered S/Ns, post-war period (after October 1945) – reconstruction by Dénes Bernád

| S/N | Type | W.Nr. | Photo | Unit | Damaged | Destroyed | W.F.U. | Notes |
|-----|-------------|--------|-------|------|---------|-----------|--------|--|
| 2 | Bf 109G-2 | 14794 | | | | | | Formerly 27/7057 |
| 3 | Bf 109G-2 | 14796 | | | | | | Formerly 29/7057 |
| 4 | Bf 109G-2 | 13793 | | | | | | |
| 5 | Bf 109G-2 | 14582 | | | | | | |
| 6 | Bf 109G-2 | 14833 | | | | | | Could be a typo for W.Nr. 14831 |
| 7 | Bf 109G-2 | 13449 | | | | | | |
| 8 | Bf 109G-2 | 13599 | | | | | | |
| 9 | Bf 109G-2 | 13416 | | | | | | |
| 10 | Bf 109G-2 | 14246 | | | | | | |
| 11 | Bf 109G-2 | 14701 | | | | | | |
| 18 | Bf 109G | | | | | | | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev off Sliven airfield in Nov.-Dec. 1945 |
| 19 | Bf 109G | | | | | | | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev off Sliven airfield on 22 Nov. 1945 |
| 22 | Bf 109G-14 | 464625 | | | | | | Trophy. Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev off Sliven airfield on 22 Nov. 1945 |
| 23 | Bf 109G-6 | 413787 | | | | | | Trophy. Flown by <i>Por.</i> Manolev off Vrazhdebna on 14.03.1946. |
| 24 | Bf 109Ga-14 | 510908 | | | | | | Trophy |
| 25 | Bf 109G-14 | 785728 | | | | | | Trophy |
| 26 | Bf 109G | | Yes | | | | | Turned on its back in accident, written off |
| 27 | Bf 109G-14 | 782764 | | | | | | Trophy |
| 28 | Bf 109G-14 | 780898 | | | | | | Trophy |
| 29 | Bf 109G-10 | 610589 | | | | | | Trophy |
| 30 | Bf 109G | 612737 | Yes | | | | | Trophy. Broken port undercarriage, repaired. Note: G-10 by its W.Nr. |
| 31 | Bf 109G-10 | 770284 | | | | | | Trophy |
| 32 | Bf 109G | | Yes | | | | | |
| 34 | Bf 109G-2 | | Yes | | | | | Belly landed |

Note: the aircraft sold to Yugoslavia in 1947–1948 are not included in the list (see separate list). W.F.U.=Written From Use (Scrapped). Only those aircraft are listed where information exists about them.



Two views of a freshly delivered Bf 109G-2, damaged in a landing mishap on 19 July 1943. See a third photo and a colour profile three pages later. The double-peak mountain seen in the background was colloquially called by the soldiers garrisoned in Karlovo 'Young woman's tits' (Момини гърди).



"Kapotazh" (overturning) of Bf 109G-2, serial (board) 'Green 10' (outlined), piloted by Ppor. Ivan Bonev of 682. Yato.

A Soviet air force Captain gestures in front of a Bulgarian Bf 109G-6, 'Red' 2' (not outlined). Photo taken on Vrazhdebna airfield, in the autumn of 1944. Notice the Soviet Yak-9 in the background, belonging to what is believed to be the 897th Fighter Aviation Regiment (IAP) of the 288th Fighter Aviation Division (IAD). Notice the heavily overpainted areas underneath and aft the cockpit.



Bf 109G-6, 'Red, or Black 5', crowded by airmen and ground personnel, in the summer of 1944.



'White 8' cruises over snow-capped mountain peaks, in Macedonia, in late autumn of 1944.





Bf 109G-2 (W.Nr. 14733), Black 32, 3/6. Onlyak, Karlovo, May 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). White, Green and Red tricolour on rudder. Spinner 1/4th White (RLM 21), 3/4th Black Green (RLM 70). Black serial number on rear fuselage and on wing lower surfaces. Stencils in Bulgarian.



This photo was taken shortly after the first batch of Bf 109G-2s was assembled and readied to be test flown in the spring of 1943, in the presence of a high-ranking VNNV officer (at left, possibly Gen. Maj. Ayryanov, head of VNNV). Although of poor quality due to water damage to the original print, a few important details are still visible: tricolour rudder, painted at the WNF factory (only a small white segment is visible on the fin top), missing aircraft type identification number from the bottom of the black triangle applied on mid-fin, black serial number stencilled on the rear fuselage (only a small segment is visible of what is believed to be a 2), aft of the Bulgarian military marking. Another photo taken at the same scene (see page 3), as well as the full silhouette photo seen on page 128 were of great help in completing the missing details. The first six Bf 109G-2s were officially taken over on 5 March 1943, while the last ones (incl. Nos. 30 and 32, subjects of colour profiles) on 9 May.



Bf 109G-2 (W.Nr. 13517), 36/7057, 672. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak, pilot Poruchik Nikolay G. Yordanov, Marno Pole (Karlovo), 19 July 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Former Luftwaffe radio code on fuselage and swastika on tail loosely overpainted with Dark Grey (RLM 74). Yellow (RLM 04) engine cowlings, lower wingtips, elevators and rudder. Colour of upper wingtips inconclusive. Spinner 1/3rd White (RLM 21), 2/3rd Black Green (RLM 70).

This freshly delivered Bf 109G-2, previously used by the Croatian-manned 15. (kroat)/JG 51 in the Crimea (USSR), suffered a landing mishap in July 1943. At this point, no Bulgarian identification numbers were applied, only the standard VNNV marking in six positions, even though it had already been assigned. The VNNV triangle is also missing from the mid-fin. Notice the rudder and elevators painted in Axis Yellow, as well as the front 3/4 of the engine cowlings (for two additional photos, see page 121).







Bf 109G-2 (W.Nr. 14789), 25/7057, Green 6, 682. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak, pilot Podporuchik Petăr Bochev, Vrazhdebna, 1 August 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Yellow (RLM 04) lower and upper wingtips, engine cowlings, elevators and rudder. Spinner 1/3rd White (RLM 21), 2/3rd Black Green (RLM 70).

The dazed looking young man in perspiration-soaked white shirt is Podporuchik Petăr Bochev of 3/6. Orlyak. He is depicted moments after he landed following a prolonged air battle with B-24D 'Liberators' on 1 August 1943.

Reportedly, Bochev was the first Bulgarian fighter pilot to score a confirmed air victory during World War 2. Certainly, he ended up the second highest scoring Bulgarian pilot, with 13 victory points on his tally. His fate after the disappearance on the final combat sortie performed on 5 October 1944 is still unclear to this day. Notice the yellow upper wingtips – subject of debate among historians and modellers – similarly painted elevators and rudder of his personal mount, 'Green 6'.





The victorious Podporuchnik Petăr Bochev poses relaxed near his mount, Green 6, savouring his first air victory. Several important details can be observed: first and foremost, the unusually light hue mid-green number is outlined in dark green (detail invisible on the main photo). The yellow painted port elevator was punctured by a bullet fired by an American on-board gunner. The lower area of the rudder, as well as the fuselage bottom were painted black for a reason that cannot be readily explained. The Bulgarian service text on the starboard elevator's trim reads: "He xeaayau" (i.e., 'Ne hvashtay', or 'Don't hold/catch'). The spot seen on the rudder is actually a smudge on the original print.



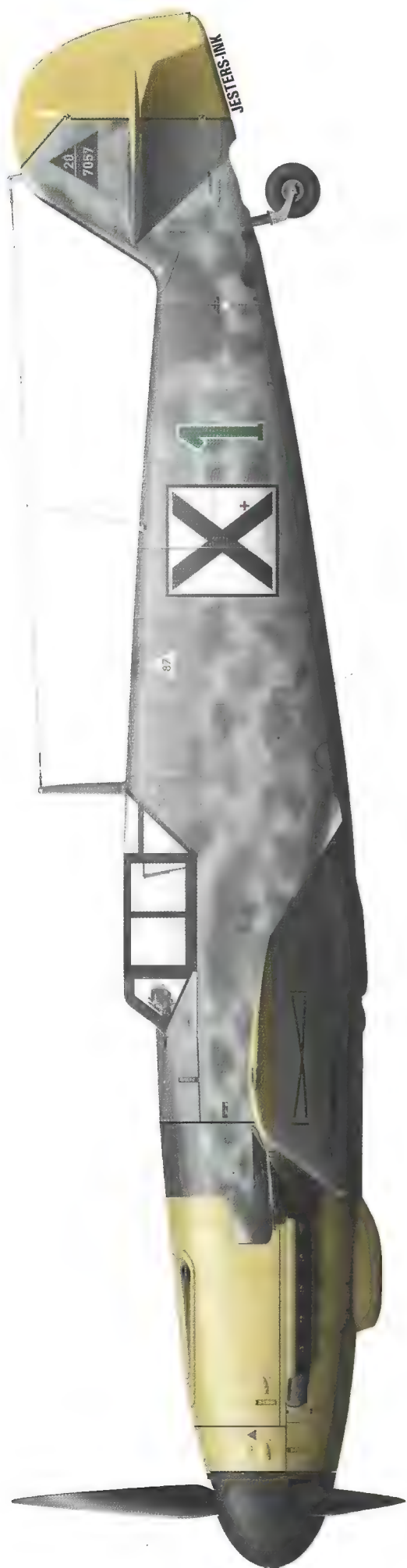
Podporuchnik Petăr Bochev vividly recalls details of his opening air combat with 'Tidal Wave' 'Liberators', just moments after he had landed on Vrazhdebna air base. The army NCO in the background looks at him (and listens to the story) somewhat incredulously. The narrow black cross in white square type military marking is clearly visible on the starboard wing.



Bf 109G-2 (W.Nr: 14785), 30/7057, Black 30, 3/6. Orlyak, Mamo Pole, near Karlovo, June 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Yellow (RLM 04) rudder, engine cowlings, lower and upper wingtips, elevators. Spinner 1/4 White (RLM 21), 3/4 Black Green (RLM 70). Black serial number on rear fuselage and on wing lower surfaces. Stencils in Bulgarian.

Superb and ultra-rare silhouette photo of a Bf 109G-2 from the first batch exported to Bulgaria, taken on a sunny day in June of 1943. The high quality original photo allows the onlooker to discover a multitude of details necessary for properly and accurately portraying an early 'Gustav' in VNNV colours. The differences between the previous artwork (see page 123) are the yellow painted rudder, elevators and front 3/4 wraparound engine cowlings, identifiable by the shinier paint layer, as well as the aircraft type's identification number, 7057, written in white on the lower area of the black mid-fin triangle. The lower and upper wingtips were yellow as well.





Bf 109G-2 (W.Nr. 14793), 20/7057, Green 1, 682. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak, pilot Poruchik Stoyan I. Stoyanov, Bozhurishte, August 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Yellow (RLM 04) lower and upper wingtips, front $\frac{3}{4}$ engine cowling, elevators and rudder. Spinner 1/3rd White (RLM 21), 2/3rd Black Green (RLM 70). Victory bar on rudder White. Stencils in Bulgarian.

'Green 1' (ex-'Black 20') was the personal mount of Poruchik Stoyan I. Stoyanov, commanding officer of 682. Yato, during the summer of 1943. Another photo of the same aircraft, published on page 7, depicts the nose section, while the one included on page 15 shows the entire aircraft, camouflaged with vegetation. Notice the white vertical bar painted on the rudder top, symbolising Luftwaffe style, the confirmed air victory achieved against a 'Liberator' bomber on 1 August 1943. The elevators were yellow as well, just like the rudder. 'Green 2' is in the background, in centre, while what is presumably 'Green 5' can be spotted at right.





Bf 109G-2, ex-Luftwaffe, Bulgaria, mid-1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Yellow Axis identification colour (RLM 04) on lower wingtips and rear fuselage ring, as well as on lower engine cowling. Spinner Black Green (RLM 70).

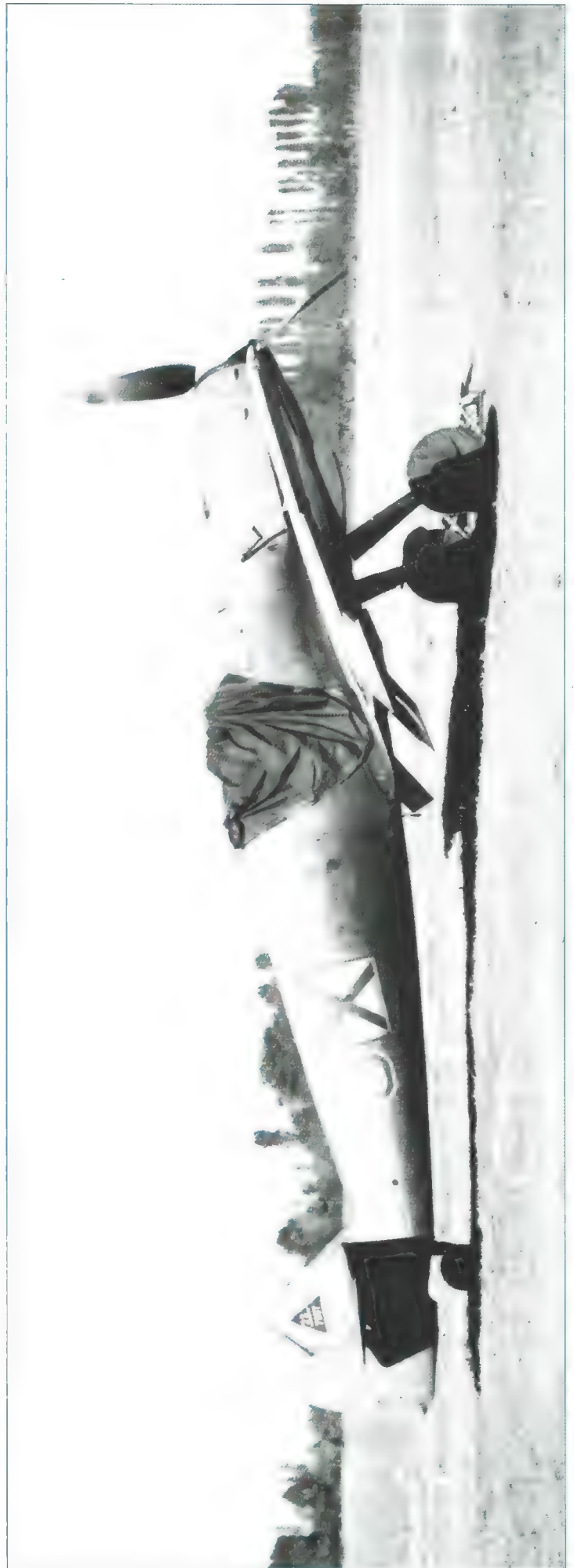
The depicted Bf 109G-2 was caught by the camera lens soon after its arrival to in Bulgaria in 1943, before being officially handed over to the VNV. The fuselage access hatch cover was mounted in reverse position, hence the strange appearance of the Balkenkreuz.





Bf 109G-2 (W.Nr: 14732), 22/7057, Green 3, 682. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak, Marno Pole (Karlovo), autumn 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Yellow (RLM 04) upper and lower wingtips, engine cowlings, rudder and elevators. Spinner Black (RLM 22), with wide White (RLM 21) spiral.

Another superb original photo of the sleek silhouette of a Bf 109G-2, 'Green 3', from the first batch exported to Bulgaria in the spring of 1943. The spinner is painted with the wide white spiral.





Bf 109G-2, Red 7, 662. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, mid-1944. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Former Luftwaffe radio code on fuselage loosely overpainted with Light Grey. Swastika on fin overpainted with Dark Grey (RLM 74). Yellow lower wingtips (RLM 04). Spinner Black (RLM 22), with wide White (RLM 21) spiral.



Belly-landed Bf 109G-2, Red 7, of 662. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, seen sometime in mid-1944. The original German Stammkennzeichen (radio code) was roughly overpainted with Light Grey. The last two letters of this four-letter code may have been GQ; however, no matching Stkz. can be found in the master list of Bf 109Gs handed over to the VNNV (the Author believes it might have been WNr. 13792, CH+GQ, built by WNF in September 1942, as WNr. 13793 was delivered to Bulgaria). Notice the bulged fairing on the wing upper surface, meant to accept the larger and more vertically aligned main wheel – a feature rarely seen on the G-2 sub-type.



Bf 109G-2, (believed to be) Red 9, 692. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak, 1944. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Squiggles of unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey applied on engine cowlings and fuselage spine. Yellow lower wingtips (RLM 04). The upper wingtips might have also been Yellow, or unidentified Light Grey. Horizontal stabiliser tips may have also been Light Grey. Spinner Black (RLM 22), with wide White (RLM 21) spiral.

Another belly-landed Bf 109G-2, this time in atypical, Bulgarian-specific camouflage scheme. Notice how the engine cowlings and fuselage spine was dotted with unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey. The upper starboard wingtip appears to be of light colour, which may have been either Yellow, or Light Grey (the latter version is more likely).

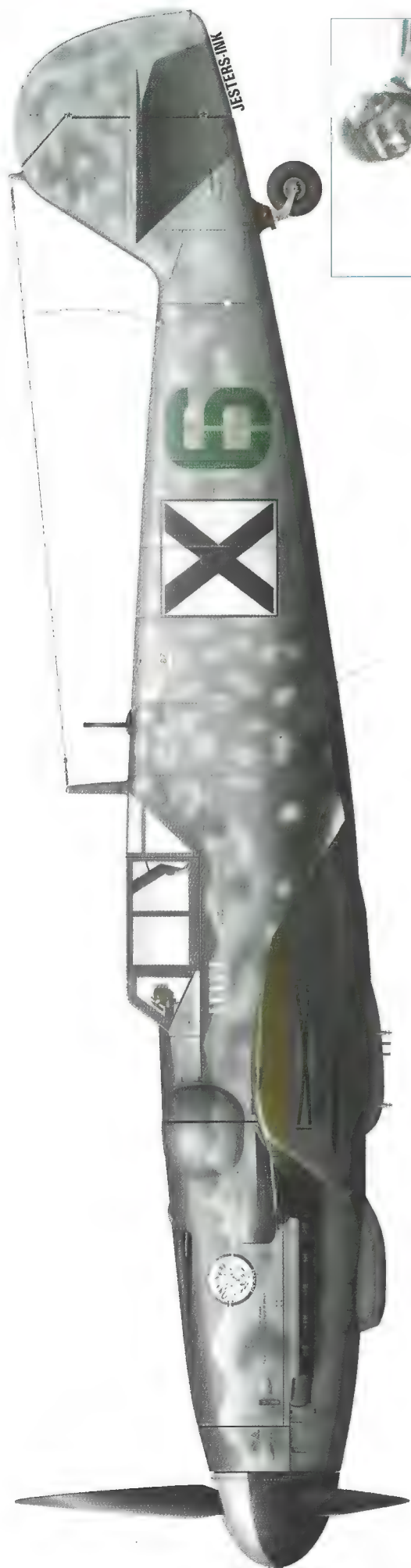




Bf 109G-6, White 4, 642. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, pilot Feldibel Atanas A. Matev, Vrazhdebna, late March 1944. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Blotches of unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey applied on fuselage, aft the cockpit canopy. Yellow (RLM 04) lower wingtips and engine cowling underside. Spinner Black (RLM 22), with wide White (RLM 21) spiral.

Feldibel Atanas A. Matev of 2/6. Orlyak leans against his mount, White 4, on Vrazhdebna airfield, in late March 1944. On another photo (see page 83), his colleagues gather in front of the aircraft's nose. Of special interest is the hastily applied personalised writing underneath the cockpit, spelling Vanya, the name of Matev's fiancée. On the final photo, Atanas and Vanya are walking on the snowy street of Yambol, on 2 January 1944.





Bf 109G-6, Green 6, 652. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, pilot Podporuchik Stefan N. Marinopolski, Karlovo, 22 July 1944. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Blotches of unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey applied on fuselage, aft the cockpit canopy, and on upper wing surfaces. Yellow lower wingtips (RLM 04). Spinner 1/3rd White (RLM 21), 2/3rd Black Green (RLM 70).

Podporuchik Stefan Marinopolski of 652. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, sits on the edge of the cockpit of his 'Green 6', sometime in late July 1944. Of special interest are the individual signs – rarely seen on Bulgarian 'Strelas'. There is a lioness's (or wildcat's) head emblem on the engine cowlings and a woman's name HELGA (interestingly, in Latin and not the usual Cyrillic letters) underneath the cockpit. Of equal interest are the blotches (and not the more frequently used squiggles) of unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey applied on the fuselage. Further photos of this machine can be seen in the main section of the book. Certain Bulgarian artworks depict this particular fighter in an unidentified Dark Green camouflage colour; however, there is no proof green was ever used as main camouflage colour on any wartime Bulgarian Bf 109Gs. In a few days, the factory applied 1/3rd White and 2/3rd Black Green spinner would be repainted in Black, with wide White spiral applied over. Based on his logbook, Marinopolski flew aboard 'Green 6' first on 15 April, then on 22, 26, 28 and 31 July, as well as 8 and 9 August 1944.



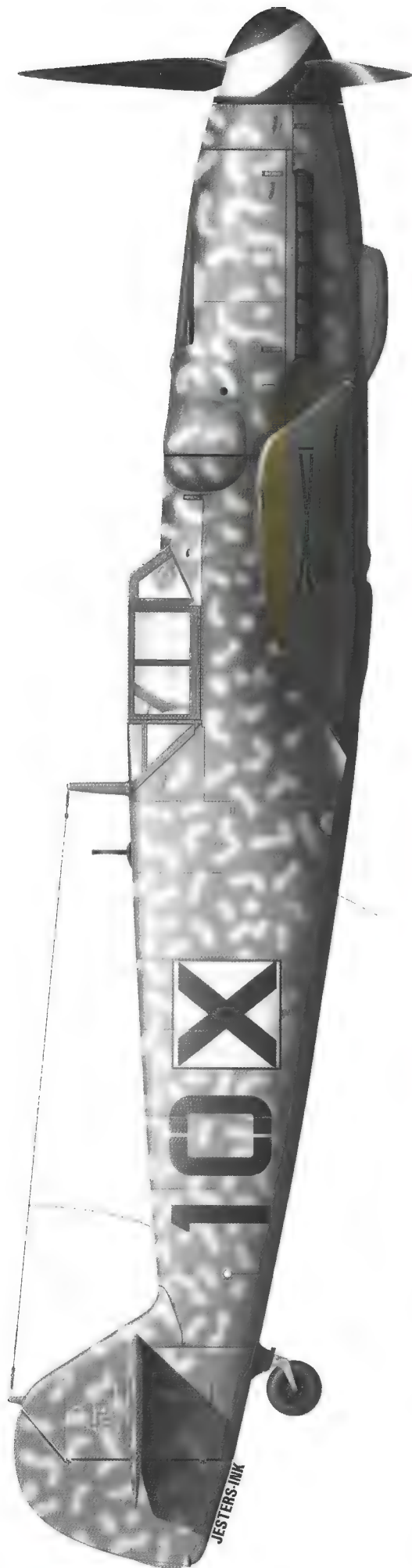


This late production G-6, Red 7, 142/7057, is certainly the most exotically painted Bulgarian 'Gustav' whose original photo survived, offering to the onlooker the best quality possible. The former Luftwaffe markings were loosely overpainted with Mid-Grey on the wings and fuselage. Unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey was then applied on the fuselage (in form of squiggles) and, most notably, on the outer area of the wings and tailplane surfaces as well. Certain Bulgarian sources claim this Light Grey seen on the wings is actually Axis Yellow. However, if true, it would have not been applied on such wide surface and painted in a slanted manner, and certainly not on the tailplane, too. There is no precedent of Yellow being visible on upper surfaces of late Bulgarian Bf 109Gs, either. The application of this unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey on the upper wing and tailplane is consistent with other instances visible for the trained eye, like the late-war Dewoitine D.520, White 14 (see appropriate colour artwork). On 29 March 1945 (another source mentions the event as happened on the 19th), 'Strela' No. 27, with Podofiser Stoyan Dachev from 2/6. Orlyak at the controls, collided with 'Strela' No. 142 parked on Bozhurishte airfield. Both aircraft were damaged, but repairable.

Bf 109G-6, 142/7057, Red 7, 662. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, mid-1944. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Former Luftwaffe markings on fuselage and swastika on fin loosely overpainted with Mid-Grey (RLM 75). Squiggles in unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey applied on fuselage sides around the cockpit as well as on fuselage spine. Outer area of wing and tailplane surfaces painted in the same Light Grey, too. Yellow lower wingtips (RLM 04). Spinner Black (RLM 22), with wide White (RLM 21) spiral.







Bf 109G-6, Black 10, Bulgaria, mid-1944. Camouflage colours: entire fuselage aft the 'bulge' on rear engine cowling and tail section Mid-Grey (RLM 75), engine cowling Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Blotches and squiggles of unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey applied on the entire fuselage. Yellow lower wingtips (RLM 04). Spinner Black (RLM 22), with White (RLM 21) spiral.

This particular Bf 109G-6 has a peculiar camouflage scheme. It appears that a mono-colour overall fuselage finish – believed to be Mid-Grey (RLM 75) – was later completed by blotches and squiggles of unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey. Even the top area of the carbon black exhaust smoke, along the lower fuselage received such Light Grey dots. By contrast, the starboard wing upper surface appears to be painted in standard Luftwaffe camouflage scheme, consisting of RLM 74/75 greys. Identifying the colour of the fuselage number also gave considerable headache to the Author. Theoretically, it must have been red; however, the shade appears to be too dark for this colour in this normally saturated photograph (samples taken by Photoshop from the board number and the adjacent national marking show almost identical shades). The logbook of fighter pilot Marinopolski and others also record flights in 1944 aboard several Bf 109Gs identified with black numbers. Therefore, the Author took a risk and eventually decided to go with the black colour, with a caveat.





Bf 109G-6, 133/7057, Green 1, 682. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak, late 1944. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). White Allied identification colour on wingtips and rear fuselage ring. Spinner Black (RLM 22), with wide White (RLM 21) spiral.

A 'Strela' troika, made by Green 1 (outlined in white), Green 8 (not outlined) and the camera aircraft, piloted by Podporuchik Pavel E. 'Pavlo' Pavlov of 3/6. Orlyak, cruises over mountainous region, in late 1944. Por. Petär Manolev often flew 'Strela' No. 1 (no colour known) in combat missions from 17 August 1944.





Bf 109G-6, Yellow 5, Shtab 6. Polk, Kapitän Vasil Manolov, August 1944. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Yellow lower wingtips (RLM 04). Spinner Black (RLM 22), with White (RLM 21) spiral.

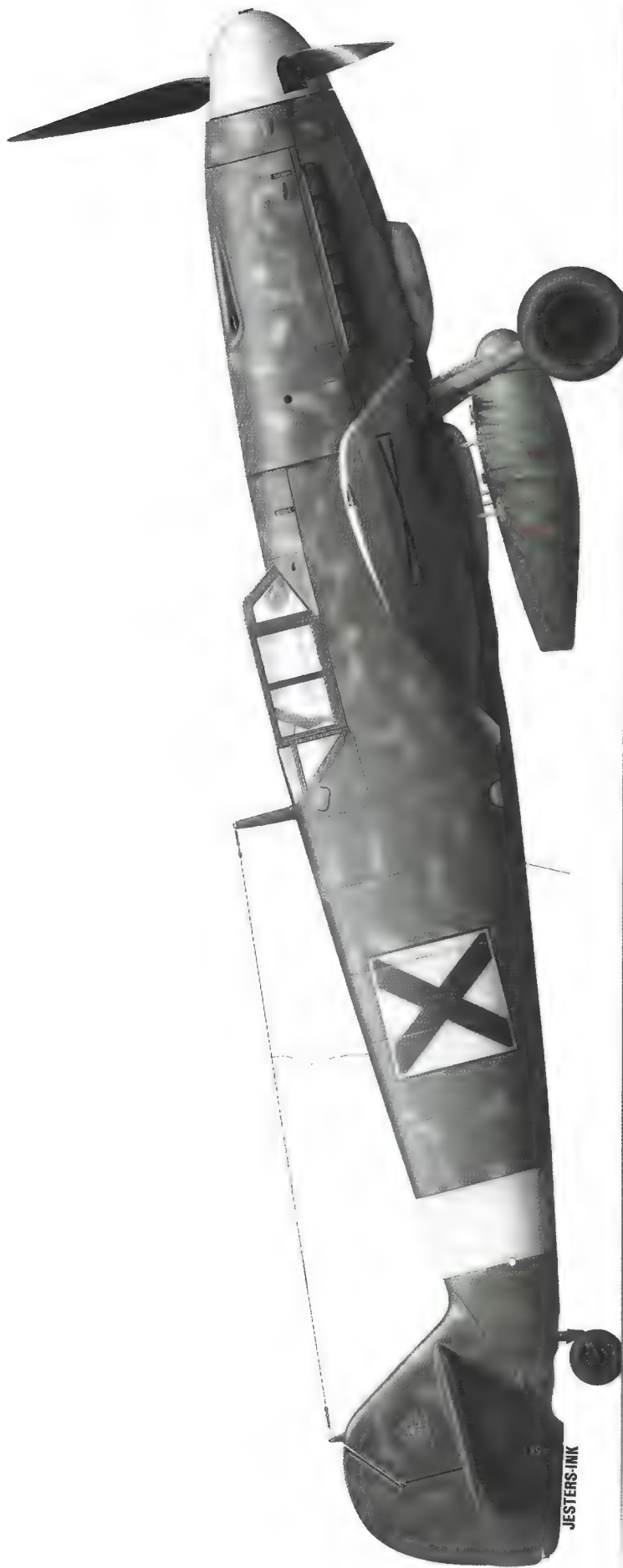


This series of photos depicts a late production, Messerschmitt AG Regensburg-built Bf 109G-6, whose fuselage (board) number appears to be pale yellow (see difference in shade to the national marking), thus making it part of the staff flight. VNV Order of Battle of 30 August 1944 lists five 'Messerschmitt-109' available to the staff of 6th Fighter Regiment. This particular 'Strela' might have been the fifth machine. The tail airman standing nearby the cockpit is Chief Aeroengineer and pilot Kapitän Vasil Manolov (1904-1983). Due to lack of further photos, the tail surface is in question, could be either the standard, or the tall one. The aircraft's board number was repeated on the wing undersurface, in yellow. The German manufacturer's typical camouflage scheme, sported by machines in the W.Nr. 162xxx-166xxx series, is visible. Notice the so-called 'Morane' antenna mast under the port wing, visible on the front view. This mast was linked to the HfG 16 ZY type of radio set, typically fitted to some late production Bf 109G-6s.



Bf 109G-6, Yellow 5, Shtab 6. Polk, August 1944. Notice the number 5 on the under wing surface (centre photo), of a darker hue than the white area of the military marking.



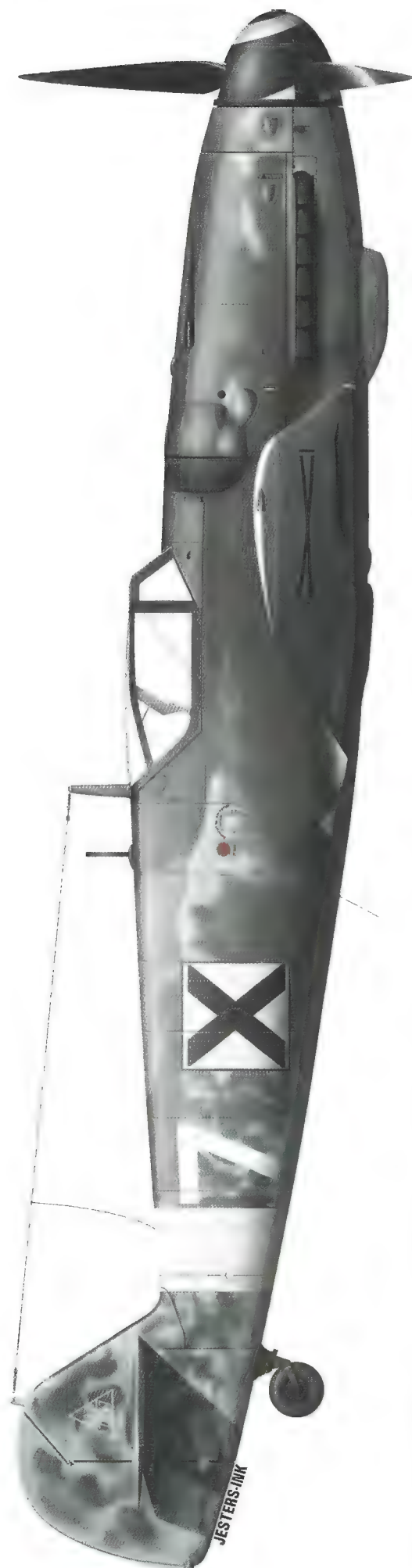


Bf 109G-2, 86/7057, Bulgaria, winter of 1944/1945. Camouflage colours: entire fuselage and wing upper surfaces Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Squiggles of unidentified Bulgarian Light Grey applied on entire fuselage and wing. White Allied identification colour on wingtips, rear fuselage band and spinner.



Two views of Bf 109G-2, NN 86/7057, taken probably in early 1945. This 'Sirela' was recently given a new layer of mid-Grey paint, which already started to peel off in places (like the canvas covered rudder, pointing at the possibility that it wasn't a specialised aviation lacquer, but rather a general purpose one). The airframe displays the typical Bulgarian Light Grey, applied as rare squiggles. The pro-Allied white identification markings on the rear fuselage, wingtips and spinner are prominent. Curiously, there is no individual serial number either on the fuselage side, or on the wing under surface.





Bf 109G-6, 127/7057, White 7, 642. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, spring 1945. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). White Allied identification colour on wingtips and rear fuselage band. Spinner Black (RLM 22), with wide White (RLM 21) spiral.

A still from the series of photos of 'White 7', taken in the spring of 1945 (for another photo of this series, see page 87). Based on the aircraft's fuselage number style, it may have belonged to 642. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak.





Bf 109G-2, 34/7057, White 34 (in triangle only), 6. Iztrebitelen Royak, 36. Iztrebitelen Orlyak, 3rd Yato, Gorna Oryahovitsa, 1946. Camouflage colours (presumably only, most probably Soviet-origin paints used): Mid-Grey (AMT-11) basecoat, with Dark Grey (AMT-12) squiggles. Greyish Blue (AMT-7) on lower surfaces. (Unfinished) OF-style marking on fuselage and tail, only White (A-11) finished. Spinner Yellow (A-6)

Had this print been published as a photo quiz, the uninitiated reader would probably have great difficulties in identifying the nationality of this 'Gustav'. Certainly, the peculiar camouflage scheme and the incomplete post-war Bulgarian air force markings give this Bf 109G-2 an exotic appearance. Uniquely, only the aircraft's serial number, 34, is included in the white triangle placed under the horizontal stabiliser, the aircraft type's four-digit number, 7057, not!





Bf 109G-6(G-14, 26/7057, White 26, 6. Iztrebiteľen Royak, 36. Iztrebiteľen Orlyak, 2nd Yato, Karlovo, 1946. Camouflage colours (presumably Soviet-origin paints were used): Mid-Grey (AMT-11) basecoat, with Dark Grey (AMT-12) squiggles. Greyish Blue (AMT-7) on lower surfaces. Markings White (A-11), Red (A-13) and Green (A-7). Spinner Red (A-13).

It's rather hard to determine the precise sub-type of this 'Gustav' with broken back, judged only by this pair of post-accident photos. What is certain is the 'Strela's' identity, reshaped after the October 1945 regulation: 26/7057 (thus not the original No. 26, a G-2, which was W/O on 25.08.1944)!



Avia B-135

The Czech Dozen

In late February 1939, a sizeable Bulgarian military delegation visited Letňany airfield, near Čakovice, Czechoslovakia, location of the Avia Works. They were looking for a quick solution to the critical needs of the fledgling *Vázdushni na Negevo Velichestvo Voyski* (VNVV, or His Majesty's Air Force). The commission, led by *Dipl.-Eng.* Dimităr Anastasov, comprising of test pilot *Dipl.-Eng. Kpt.* Petko Popganchev, as well as test pilot *Por.* Krăstyu Atanasov as technical experts, looked both to purchase warplanes readily available for sale and to secure license rights for local manufacturing.

Among the readily available aircraft types selected to be purchased were the agile Avia B.534 biplane fighter and the all-metal Avia B.71 (licence of the Soviet SB type) monoplane bomber. Besides these two types, the delegation expressed considerable interest in the prototype of a low-wing, modern looking fighter aircraft, the Avia B-35. According to the Bulgarians' request, the prototype of the B-35 was presented to them by *Dipl.-Eng.* František Novotný, chief designer of the Avia Company, on 23 February. The Bulgarians were told – misleadingly – that at the beginning of the year, the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defence had ordered series production of this fighter airplane. Later that day, Rudolf Dalecký, Avia's chief test pilot, performed an in-flight performance in front of the foreign delegation.

During the following days, the Bulgarians studied thoroughly the technical documentation of the fighter aircraft. Everyone liked the attractive looking all-metal fighter plane; therefore, the commission decided to continue with the test programme. However, the following month, the IIIrd Reich occupied western Czechoslovakia, so the process came to an abrupt halt. Nonetheless, despite this unpredictable event, the Bulgarian Ministry of War didn't give up its pursuit to secure the pre-ordered warplanes, which were badly needed for the expanding Bulgarian air force. After acquiring the necessary permits in Berlin, the Bulgarians again contacted the Avia Works in order to complete the previously started deal. They eventually succeeded in persuading the new management of the company to finalise the contract.

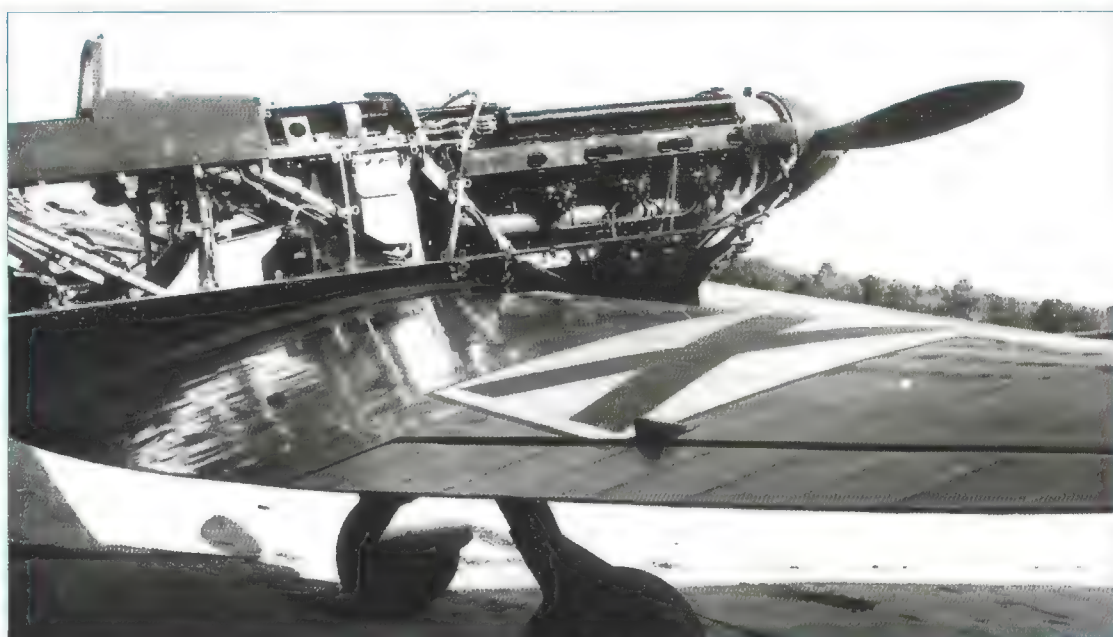
In the meantime, testing had continued at Avia Works, with active participation of the Bulgarians. The Czech side was represented by *Dipl.-Eng.* Růzha, *Dipl.-Eng.* Smolař, *Dipl.-Eng.* Duda, *Dipl.-Eng.* Pavlíček, as well as test-pilots Zemánek and Dalecký. From the Bulgarian side, a commission – led by



One of the two Avia B-135 prototypes – believed to be the first one, B-135.1, formerly B-35.3, judged by the angled rear area of the main undercarriage cover – wearing Luftwaffe marking, rolls on the runway of Letňany airfield (in the so-called 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia'), probably in June 1940, at the time of the Bulgarian delegation's visit. The aircraft is painted RLM-Grau (RLM 02) overall. The extensive exhaust smoke along the fuselage is in sharp contrast to the official photos, which show a pristine aircraft offering background to the three-man Bulgarian VIP delegation.



Avia B-135, No. 5, being assembled at DSF Lovech, from main parts shipped by the Avia Works in wooden crates in February 1943. Notice the shiny darker shade camouflage colour on the wing inner surface in contrast to the lighter shade camouflage colour that appears dull, as well as the size and positioning of the Bulgarian military marking.



Kpt. Popganchev was one of the two Bulgarian pilots who test flew the B.35/135 prototypes at the Avia factory in 1940.

Dipl.-Eng. Dimităr Anastasov – made up by aviation specialists, engineers and pilots, was present at Letňany to actively assist design work and factory tests of the new aircraft type, still being developed. The Bulgarian technicians arrived not only to theoretically familiarise themselves with various aspects of aircraft production the Czechs had mastered, but to actually take part in the manufacturing process as well. This hands-on activity helped them accumulate the experience vital to the planned Bulgarian series production.

The joint work was intense, sometime difficult, and not without discord. It is known that from the initial prototype, the B-35.1, to the actual machines to be manufactured for Bulgaria, 22 different cooling radiator types and 18 tail configurations were tested. Various lengths and shapes of fuselage, wings (with or without aperture for retractable landing gear) and cockpit were also considered. The wing-fuselage fillet form and size, along with the surfaces of ailerons, flaps, etc., also changed several times. Armament configuration varied several times. Finally, quite a few engine types were considered to propel the airframe, along with at least three types of propellers.

Parallel to the development and manufacturing process, Bulgarian pilots, including *Kapitan* Popganchev and *Poruchik* Atanasov, started to familiarize themselves in flying the new machine. It is recorded in the company annals that both Atanasov and Popganchev flew the new B-135.1 (former B-35.3 prototype)¹ on 14 June 1940. Both test flights lasted slightly over half an hour and did not cause any incidents. Other flights remained unrecorded. During the initial short accommodation flight, with the older B-35.2, logged on 28 May 1940, Petko Popganchev inadvertently

¹ Avia test pilot František Zemánek flew the B.135.1 on 21.05.1940.

steered the aircraft off the paved landing strip onto rough terrain, due to the excessively high landing speed. The starboard main wheel stuck in a ditch and was bent. Consequently, the airplane turned over, but due to the low speed the resulting damage was minimal, assessed later at only 5%. Although soaked with fuel that poured onto him from a ruptured fuel pipe, the somewhat shaken Bulgarian pilot could walk away from the site of the accident unhurt. This was also due to the airframe's solid construction and the head-protecting crash tubing, incorporated into the cockpit, right aft of the pilot's head. Popganchev was convinced that this crash tube actually saved his life and expressed his gratitude toward the Czechs later in the evening with a copious dinner at a local glitzy restaurant, 'soaked' in champagne². No further significant incidents had been recorded by the Bulgarian party during the sporadic test flights, which continued in the following month with the other prototype, the B-135.1. This prototype was to serve later as pattern for the forthcoming series production³.

A New Era, a New Deal

After the successful conclusion of the redesign work and detailed testing, the contract between the Bulgarian Ministry of War and the Avia Works – by then called Avia *Aktiengesellschaft* AG (or Joint-Stock Company) *Flugzeugindustrie* following the German invasion of March 1939 – was finally signed on 12 January 1940. The reworked contract stipulated that the Bulgarians purchase 24 modernized versions of the B-35 fighter prototype – designated B-135 – to be manufactured at Avia during the next two years. The first dozen had to be delivered in January 1943, with the second batch five months later. For unknown reasons (possibly capacity issues at Avia), the order was later reduced to 12 aircraft, as detailed in the Contract dated 30.09.1940. Fifty [later reduced to 25] Hispano-Suiza HS 12Y31 engines and a sole 'Avia 122' were also part of the deal. The contract also secured for the Bulgarian party the rights to series build the airframe in Bulgaria. Production would have been undertaken at the newly erected airplane factory at Lovech, called *Dǎrzhavna Samoleta Fabrika* (DSF, or State Airplane Factory). The deal called for 50 airframes to be manufactured at DSF from indigenous materials, while the engines, armament and various flight instruments to be supplied by the Czechs. There was even a Bulgarian name selected for the new fighter, DAR-11 *Lyastovitsa* (Swallow).

Production of the B-135s by the Avia Works started only in early 1942. The twelve airframes were completed by September of the same year. The first aircraft of this small series – Avia constr. no. 101, engine no. 21786, wearing temporary German civilian ferry registration D-IWKM – was first flown by Petr Široký on 7 April. More flights with No. 101 were performed on the 9th, 14th, 21st and 25th of the month, and later on 8 May. The last unit of the series was not No. 112, but rather No. 111, first flown by the same pilot on 1 October. Later that month, the engine was fitted with three different propeller types, including an indigenous Letov Hd 43 and a French Ratier one. Last known flight of an Avia-135 in the (occupied) Czechoslovakia was performed on 6 October 1942.

After work had been concluded and all aircraft test flown, they were disassembled and crated. The wooden containers, labelled in German, arrived in Bulgaria, at Lovech, on flatbed wagon platforms⁴ in February 1943. Along with the airframes and spare parts, complete documentation was delivered as well. An invoice issued by Avia AG at Prague on 17 March lists the delivery of twelve Avia B-135 airframes, along with accessories and spare parts. The 25 contracted Avia-Hispano-Suiza engines had arrived much earlier, as a German list dated 28.11.1940 lists all of them, including their construction numbers. Protocol filled at Marno Pole on 12.02.1941 confirms the arrival of these Czech-made power-plants.

A group of Czech specialists also arrived in Bulgaria, including *Dipl.-Eng.* Bohumil Hošťálek, head of the team, and technicians Anton Vuček, Emanuel Lís, Karel Šubert and Stanislav Hudomil. They were to assist in the final assembly, as well as in setting up the manufacturing process for the planned series production at the DSF Works.

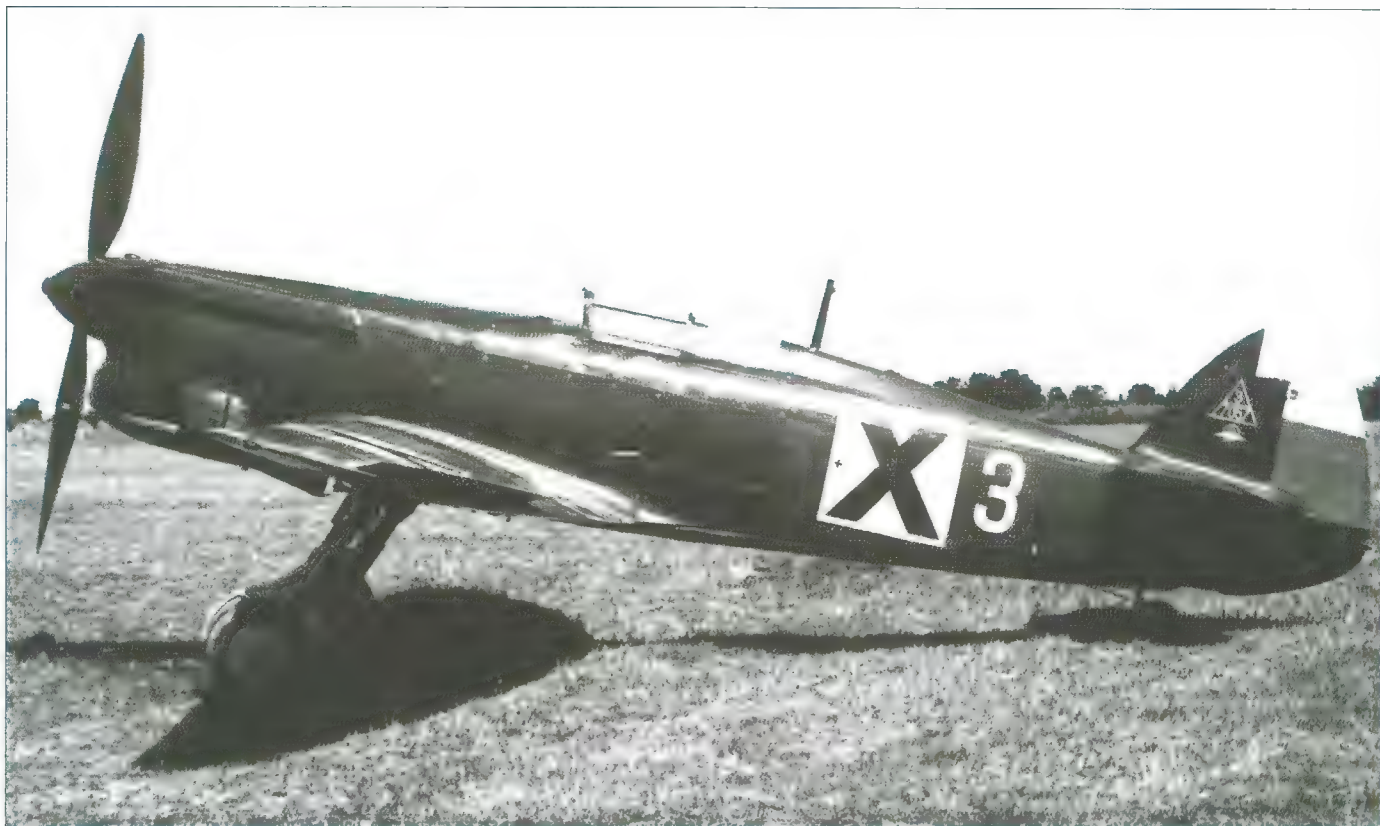
Protocol dated 25.07.1943 describes the arrival and assembly of the 12 Avia-135s in the State Airplane Factory at Lovech. During assembly, it became apparent that the airframes were subject to rust, erosion and weathering, affecting particularly the wings. Other structural defects were discovered as well⁵. These shortcomings were summed up in a protocol issued on 22 November 1943 and submit-

2 Based on his flight summary for 1940, these two test flights were Popganchev's only ones with the Avia fighter, which lasted a total of 40 mins.

3 The Bulgarian order for twelve aircraft was to be the sole series production of this aircraft type.

4 A Czech source mentions that several crates caught fire and burned en route, before they reached Bulgaria. However, no known Bulgarian sources substantiate this claim, and all 12 Avias were impressed into VNVV service.

5 The original text specified: "Самолетите Авия 135 са с повредени от корозия крила поради конструктивен дефект, искане за ремонт и доклад" (The Avia 135 aircraft have wings damaged by corrosion, due to construction defect, request for repair and report).



Nice study of the silhouette of the nimble Czech design. It is believed that No. 3 was the first Avia B-135 to be flown in Bulgaria.

ted to the manufacturer. No follow up documentation was found by the Author, however. All these shortcomings must have been remedied, however, as all twelve aircraft eventually passed all mandatory quality checks and were considered service-ready.

In August 1943, all twelve machines were assembled and readied for their mandatory test flights. They received serial numbers between 1-12 and a four-digit *Nomenklaturen Nomer* (Military Registration Number) 7057⁶. Acceptance protocol signed at Lovech on 25 August refers to the twelve engine-less airframes, Nos. 101 to 112.

First to take off was aircraft No. 3, or AV-135-103, according to the Bulgarian registration. The pilot chosen to perform the maiden flight was the reputable *Kapitan* Krăstyu Atanasov, Commanding Officer of the VNVV's *Iztrebitelnata Shkola* (Fighter School), based at Dolna Mitropoliya. The initial test flight went without any incidents, as did the subsequent ones as well. Apart from Atanasov, the other pilots involved in test flights at some point were also instructors at the Fighter School: *Ponuchik* Bogdan Iliev, *Podporuchitsi* Petăr Manolev⁷ and Dimităr Sotirov, as well as *Feldfebel* Yordan Ferdinandov and Nedio Kolev.

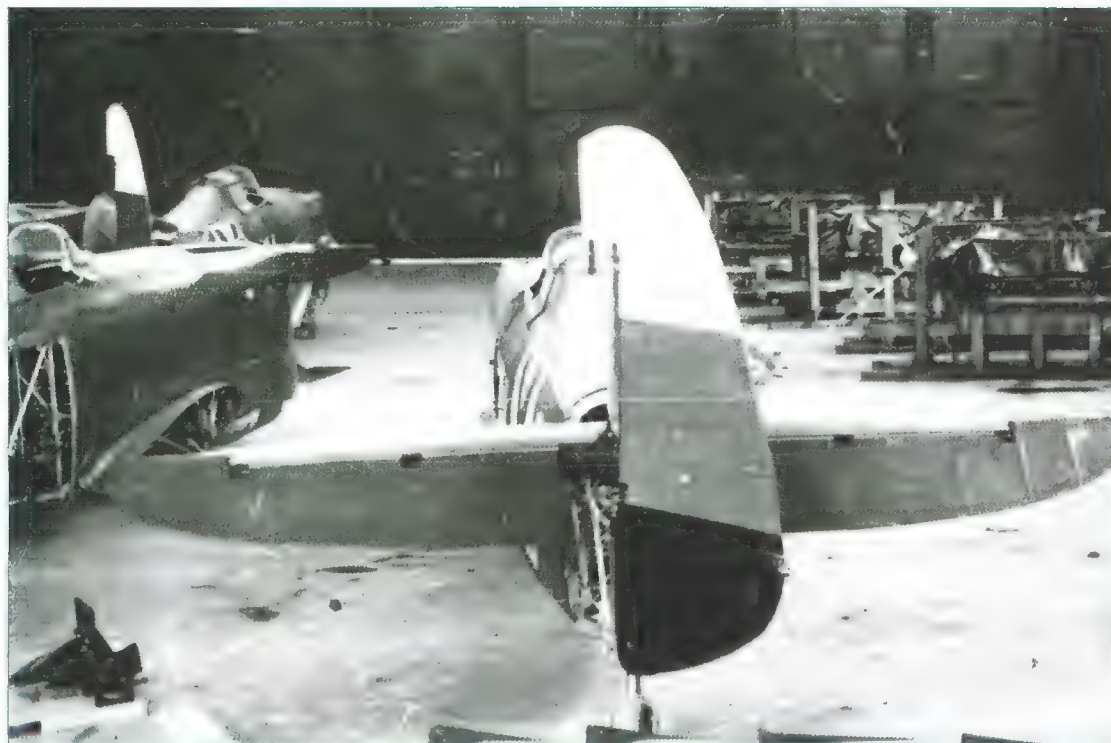
By 28 August, all twelve aircraft were test flown and officially accepted by the VNVV. It has to be noted that by then, the vastly superior Messerschmitt Bf 109G had already entered active service (using the same NN, 7057!), and became the mainstay fighter type of the Bulgarian air force. Quite understandably, it overshadowed the modest Avia B-135, in quality, armament power and numbers.

Once the reception procedures were completed, the Avias were ferried directly to Dolna Mitropoliya base, home of the Fighter School. The reason why the brand-new fighters were assigned to the secondary fighter trainer role, instead of first line duty, was because of the mixed opinions formed by Bulgarian test pilots while testing the aircraft. They experienced difficulties at take-off, due to the underpowered Hispano-Suiza (licence built by Avia) 12Y31 engine of only 860 hp at 2,400 rpm. Also, due to the long stiff undercarriage with narrow wheel track⁸, there was a strong and unpleasant vibration while taxiing. Once in the air, the Avia performed adequately; however during aerobatics, in extreme conditions when high wing loadings usually occur, the airframe performed unsatisfactorily. For example, during a mock dogfight

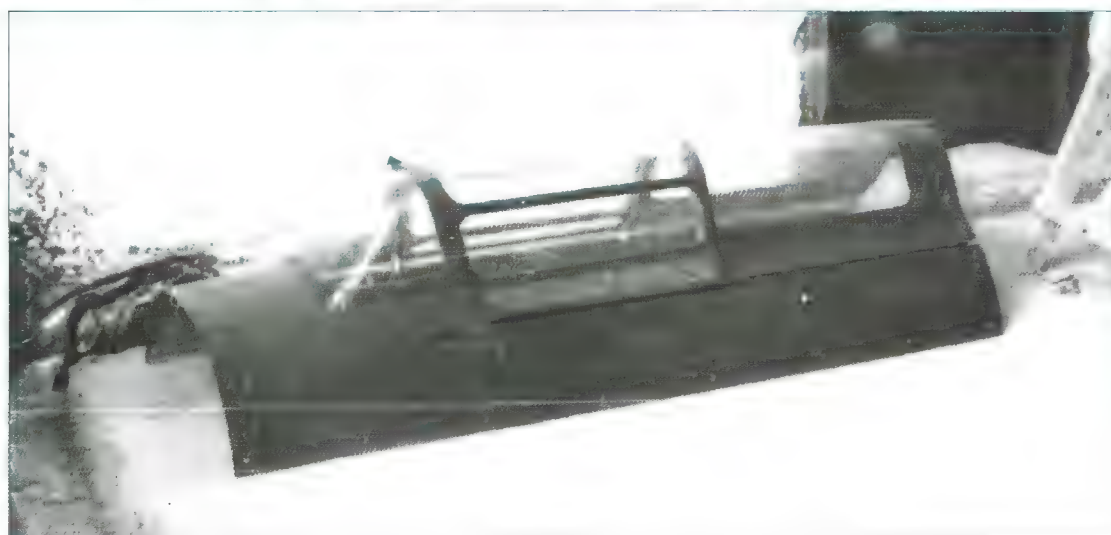
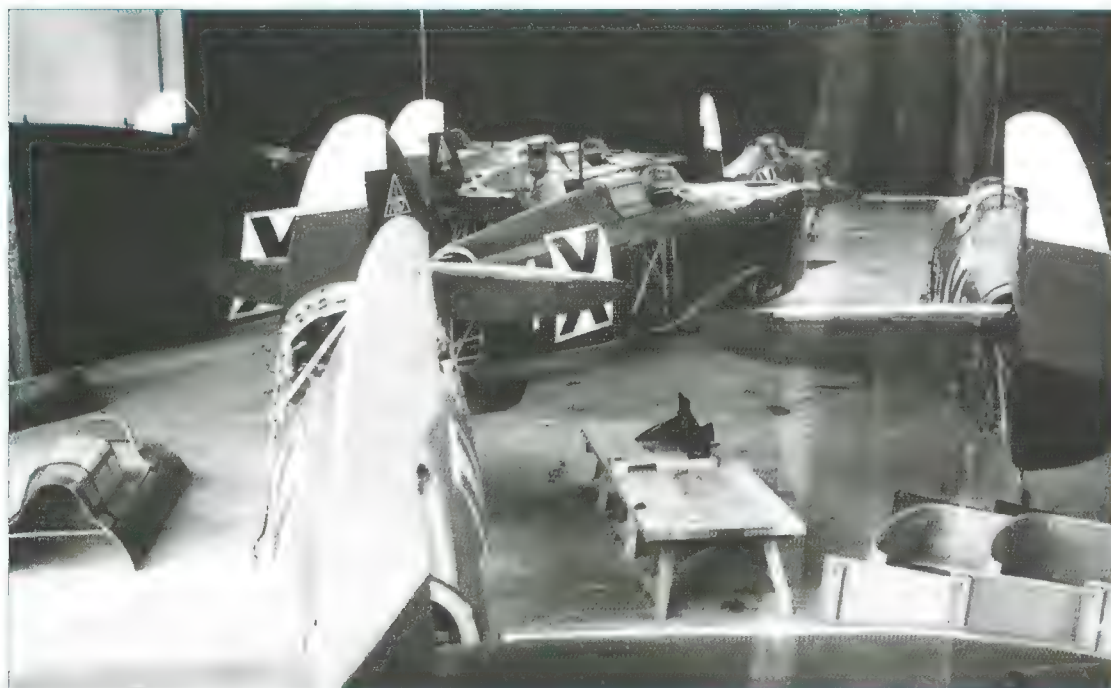
6 For a strange reason, the Messerschmitt Bf 109G type also received the same *Nomenklaturen Nomer*, namely 7057. One plausible explanation could be that originally, the Avia B-135 was intended to be impressed in VNVV service *before* the Bf 109G; therefore, the NN had been assigned to the type accordingly. Still, the Avia B-135 could have been identified with the next available NN, the 7067, when it belatedly entered service, but that did not happen, probably due to careless bureaucrats. This way, at the end, two fighter aircraft types existed in Bulgarian service with the same NN, but different serial (board) numbers.

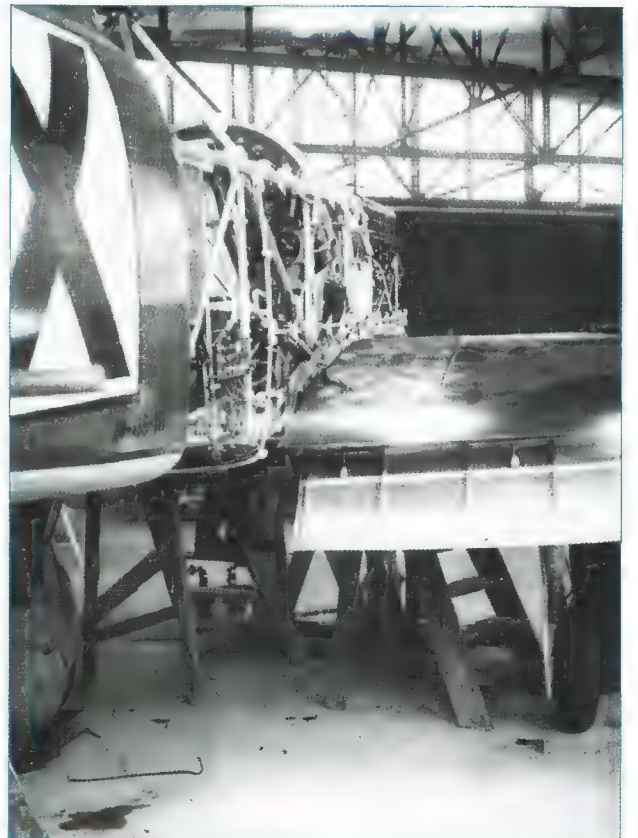
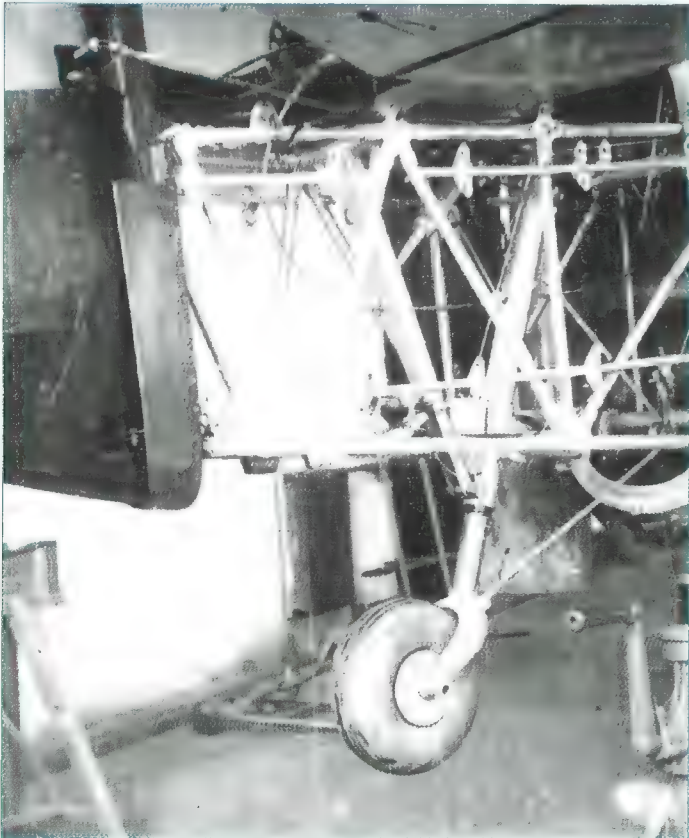
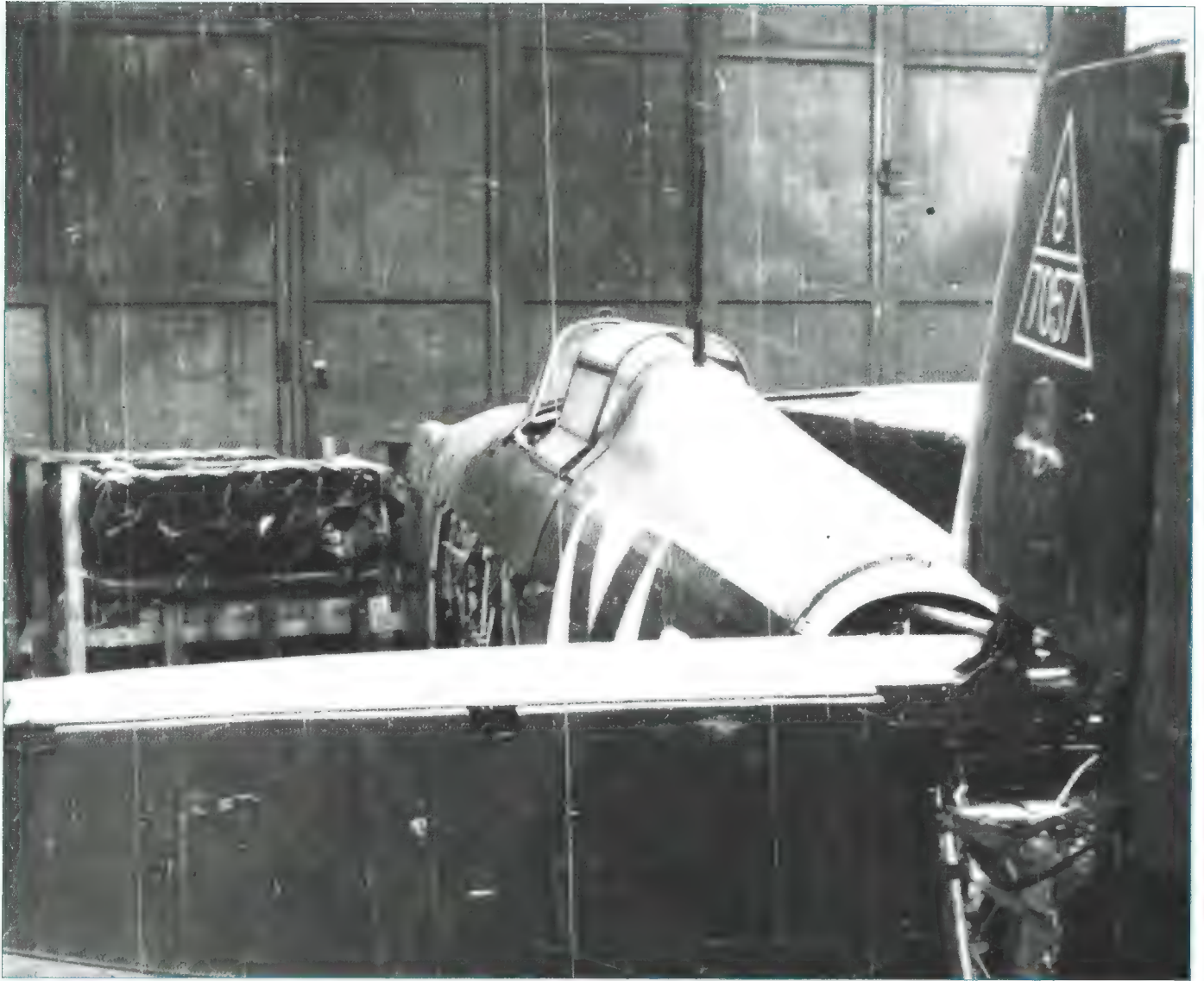
7 The first entry in *Ppor.* Manolev's wartime logbook is dated 10 September, when he flew No. 2 at Dolna Mitropoliya, from 10.25 a.m. to 11.05 a.m. Interestingly, the aircraft type is mentioned in Latin characters (i.e., AVIA), rather than the Cyrillic Bulgarian nick-name, in this case *Lyastovitsa* – as was the case with the other types that Manolev flew.

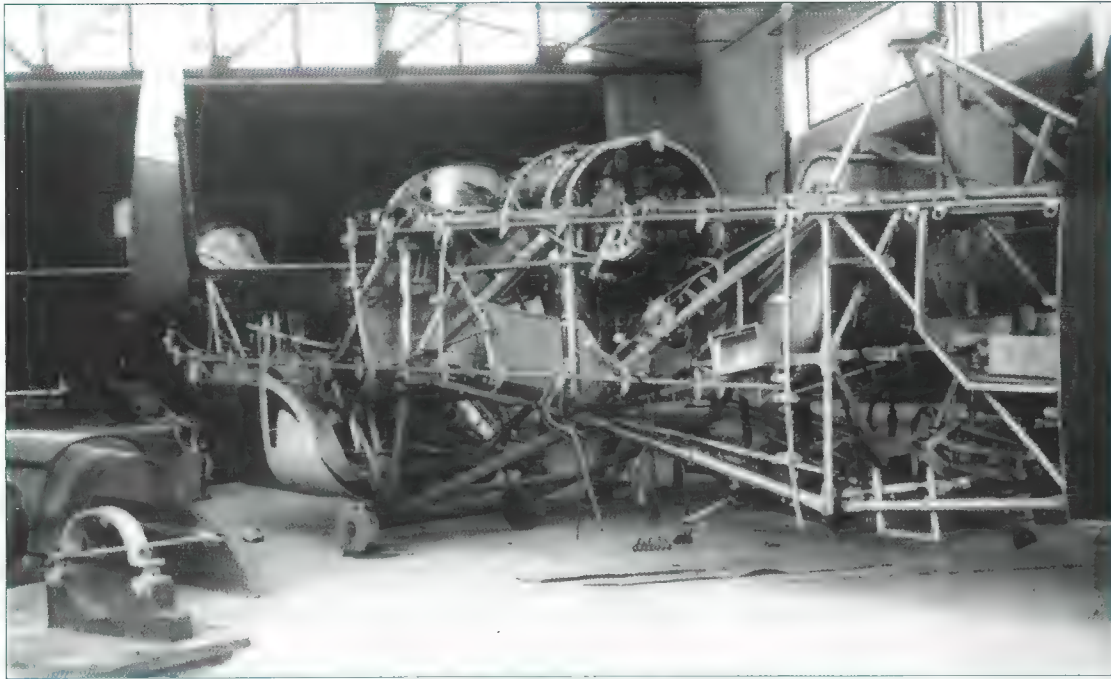
8 'The distance between two wheels on the same axle of a vehicle' – in this case aircraft. For the B.135, it was only 2510 mm.



Assembly work continued inside the main hangar at Lovech throughout the spring and summer of 1943. In this series of photos, the assembly work of aircraft Nos. 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 10 and 11 is documented. Notice on the photo two pages later, in the centre, depicting one of the hangar's corners, the highly polished finish of the propeller spinner and tail, which is in line with the darker tone camouflage colour observed on the wings, believed to be RLM 70 Black Green. The two-tone camouflage colour finish of the wings and horizontal stabilisers (tailplanes) are obvious, in contrast to the fuselage, which was apparently finished in a single tone camouflage colour, believed to be RLM 70. All VNVV markings and codes were applied at the Avia factory, prior to shipment to Bulgaria.







The venerable 38-year-old pilot, Kapitan Krăstyu Atanasov, in the cockpit just moments before the maiden flight of the first Avia B-135 in Bulgaria, No. 3, performed in August 1943. Due to the summer heat, he is wearing only a black sleeveless shirt, and took on the bulky back parachute over it.



of two B-135 pairs flown by highly skilled instructors, following steep turns and subsequent dives, one aircraft's wings deformed, and the sheet metal skin cracked, giving much concern to the pilot, *Por.* Bogdan Iliev, in his attempt to bring it back to ground safely. As a consequence, restrictions were issued concerning the amount of aerobatics that could be performed, practically making the aircraft unsuitable for 'live' combat, the rôle it was originally designed for. Finally, the armament consisting of only of a pair of rifle calibre machine guns was considered, rightfully, inadequate for the event of encountering modern USAAF, or VVS fighters and bombers. The planned installation of an engine-mounted 20 mm rapid-fire cannon would have greatly improved its firepower; however, this never materialized, rendering the Avia unusable as efficient combat tool. As a consequence, the decision was made to relegate the twelve B-135s to the fighter trainer role, and transfer them to the Fighter School. Even there, the instructors did not allow students to fly them, as they considered the type too difficult to handle for an inexperienced flyer. Thus, only the instructors flew the aircraft occasionally, to keep themselves in shape⁹.

⁹ Petăr Manolev's next flight was performed only on 25 November. This time, the complete aircraft type is mentioned: AVIA 135, without the individual serial number being recorded. His last flight aboard an Avia B-135 happened on 6 July 1944, when he took into the air the same No. 6 on a 35 min. flight over Dolna Mitropoliya (for a complete list of his flights aboard the Avia B-135, see on-line annex).



Pilots' Opinions

Here's how one of the instructors at the Flying School, retired Col. Petăr Manolev, summed up his experiences with the Avia B-135 when interviewed by Teodor Muhovski in June 2000: "This plane had a somewhat underpowered engine. Also, it had no oxygen system for high altitude flights. In some parts it was very similar to the Dogan [Avia B.534, all notes in square brackets by the Author], as the armament, engine and cockpit instruments were the same. In its looks, this aircraft [the B-135] was very similar to the Spitfire, mainly due to the elliptic wings. But compared to the English fighter, the Avia had to taxi much longer at take-off to reach the needed speed. During the long taxiing at both take-off and landing, the pilot was getting an unpleasant feeling. (...) In the air, the Avia B-135 could not gain high speed fast enough, as the engine was weak. (...) We found the plane insecure in combat. We decided not to go too far with the [wing] overloading, to avoid accidents.

I think that this plane was good for transition [from primary biplane trainers] to the Dewoitine [D.520] and the Messerschmitt [Bf 109]. But we never let student pilots actually fly with this machine, because of two reasons. Firstly, the wartime [requirements] were very 'hot' and we were sending the pilots to the combat yata [squadrons] immediately after they had accumulated enough experience with the Dogan. In combat yata, they were transferred to the Dewoitine and, from 1944, directly to the Me 109. Secondly, this plane required many flight hours with other types before one would attempt to fly it. It didn't forgive mistakes. If we had let them fly the B-135, they would have destroyed the planes in no time, as there were only twelve such machines, which were quite difficult to fly, without spare parts readily available. That is why we, the instructors, were the only ones who flew the type."

Another pilot, retired Col. Yordan Ferdinandov, who also often flew the Avia monoplane fighter, recalls: "The Avia B-135 had a clean shape and nicely rounded wings. The control of the plane was light; however, at take-off it had the tendency to roll to the left, but this was easy to overcome. This plane had an inconvenience: when the engine was run at full power on the ground, during tests, although chocks were put in front of main wheels, the machine was tilting critically forward, risking hitting the ground with the propeller and tilt over. Because of this, when the engine had to be tested on the ground, several men of the ground staff had to sit on the plane's horizontal stabilizers. The two long main wheel legs caused difficulties at take-off and landing, as the airplane could turn over easily when taxiing on rough terrain. When we were moving the planes from Lovech to Dolna Mitropoliya, after we had accepted them from the factory [after assembly], I could not lift No. 11 off the ground in time because of the too short landing strip and stuck

Kpt. Atanasov is taking off on the maiden flight aboard No. 3. Over three years have passed since he had originally flown the first Avia B-135, back in Czechoslovakia. Since then, the aircraft type became obsolescent, and was therefore relegated to fighter trainer role.

Excerpt from a German document, dated 16.08.1943, listing aircraft delivered to Bulgaria. Misleadingly, it lists two completed deliveries of 12 Avia B.135s each (in January and June 1943). Despite what is written here, the second delivery didn't actually happen. Conclusion: one should pay special attention even to information included in original documents, as occasionally they can be misleading.

| I orderung | Freigegeben | | Ausgeliefert | | Bemerkungen |
|-----------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------|----------------------------|
| | Anzahl | Liefertermin | Monat | Anzahl | |
| 12 Avia B 135 | 12 | | Jan. 43 | 12 | |
| 12 Avia B 135 | 12 | | Juni 43 | 12 | |
| 12 Arado 196 A3 | 12 | | Febr. 43 | 12 | |
| 4 F1 156 | 4 | Juli/Aug. 43 | Juli 43 | 2 | San.-Ausführung |
| 12 Bf 109 G 2 | 12 | Juli 43 | | | aus Umrüstung I./J.G. 4 |



Another side shot of No. 3. This time, however, the shape of the numeral on the fuselage is different than the one seen on the previous photo! A possible explanation could be that the canvas covering the mid-fuselage structure had to be replaced for some reason.

a haystack, causing a minor accident. I want to emphasize that this airplane never tolerated mistakes, and thus was not suitable for inexperienced pilots. Despite these shortcomings, I actually trusted the Avia B-135. It had good instruments, and I felt in its cabin as comfortable as in the Me 109's. The forward view was very good, and after the retraction of the landing gear the machine's behaviour changed, becoming lighter and increasing its speed immediately. The aerodynamics of the airplane was very successful; maybe it needed a more powerful engine and an improved landing gear. I forgot to say that this plane was armed with only two synchronized 7.92 mm machine guns, mounted over the engine. The planned 20 mm cannon, shooting from the axis of the propeller, never arrived. The button for it, situated to the right of the button for the machine guns on the pilot's control column, was removed, the aperture being covered with a piece of bandage tape. If only this cannon was installed and with some design improvements, the plane would have been excellent.

I remember another interesting detail. When the airplanes arrived in crates, and after unpacking the main parts, the Bulgarian technicians discovered strange brownish stains on the foil that covered the wings. It turned out that large areas of the wing surface were corroded. The control commission established that the wings had been purposely sprayed with acid (i.e., sabotaged) back in Czechoslovakia. We kept the fact secret, as we didn't want the Czech specialists, who came here to help us assembling the airplanes, to be persecuted. At Lovech [at the DSF Works], the corrosion was carefully removed with soft sandpaper, the damaged surfaces polished, painted and varnished again. But I think this impacted the short flight life of the machines, as during their storage in the open at Dolna Mitropoliya, the corrosion soon reappeared. (...)” Indeed, an official note dated 22 November 1943 mentions that the Avia 135 aircraft are damaged by corrosion due to structural defects in wings. Repair is requested by the Avia factory. No follow-up correspondence was found by the Author, but certainly it existed.

‘Lyastovitsa’ – a Stillborn Bird

Despite the agreement reached by the Czechs and Bulgarians regarding series production of the B-135 by the latter party, and a contract signed, eventually no DAR-11 rolled off the assembly lines of DSF-Lovech. The primary cause of this failure can be attributed to the real masters of the east European region: the Germans. By 1942, the IIIrd Reich, fully involved in war, needed all available resources of its aviation industry to be directed to fulfil the rapidly increasing needs of the *Luftwaffe*. This meant the inclusion of all manufacturing units with aeronautical skills existing in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia – including the large Avia Works – in the overall war production. All contracts for clients other than the *Luftwaffe* were cancelled. This included the Bulgarian order for 50 Hispano-Suiza engines, intended to be fitted to the DAR-11 airframes manufactured at Lovech. Besides the engines, the Czechs had also to supply cockpit instruments, armament and other sophisticated parts. Without these vital items available, the whole manufacturing process collapsed. Even the planned upgrade of the existing B-135s with the engine-mounted 20 mm cannon could not take place, rendering the fighters practically unfit for modern combat. The *Lyastovitsa* (Swallow) was truly a stillborn bird. The DAR-11 project was dropped¹⁰.

¹⁰ Reportedly, the Hungarians also showed keen interest in placing an order with the Bulgarians for a batch of DAR-11s; however, the deal eventually fell through.

The Sole 'Kill'

There was a 'glitter' however, before the dozen Bulgarian B-135s would fall into obscurity. The unique 'live' combat mission would yield the sole 'kill' – although unconfirmed – in the short and unspectacular career of the Czech fighter plane.

On 30 March 1944, a massive bombing raid against the Bulgarian capital and surroundings was carried out by USAAF, in several waves. To have a better overall view of the events of this particular day, we quote the report compiled by the Commander-in-Chief of the Bulgarian Air Defence, Col. Velichkov:

"Văzdushni na N. V. Voyski. Order about the anti-air defence of the country. (15 May 1944)

(...) On 30 March 1944, from 09:45 to 11:15, an enemy air formation of about 450 bombers ('Liberator' and 'Fortress II' types) and about 150 fighters ('Lightning' and 'Mustang' types), in four separate waves, executed the 12th air attack against our capital, Sofia. It was done for political effect, to disorganise the economy and terrorize the people.

The first wave, about three-squadron strong, made of 35-40 bombers flying in wedge formation each, came from west-southwest direction, and released the bomb load in 'carpet bombing' style. The area covered by bombs was the sugar factory district, the Central Railway Station and the Poduene Railway Station. Flight altitude was 6400 m [21.000 ft].

The second wave, about three-squadron strong, made of 30-35 bombers flying in wedge formation each, came from the south, and released their bomb load in the same 'carpet bombing' style over the 'Văzrazhdane' Square, the 'St. Nedelya' Square and His Majesty's Military School. Flight altitude was 6800 m [22.300 ft].

The third wave, about three-squadron strong, made of 35-40 bombers flying in wedge formation each, came from south-west, and released the bomb load on the 'Skobelev' Boulevard, 'Ferdinand I' Boulevard and 'Slatinski Redut'. Flight altitude was 7,000 m [23,000 ft].

The fourth wave, about two-squadron strong, made of 30-35 bombers flying in wedge formation each, came from the north, and released the bomb load on the 'Sveta Nedelya' Square and the Lozenets District.

About 3,000 destructive and 30,000 incendiary bombs were dropped, destroying 3,357 buildings. The typical bomb calibres were 250, 500 and 1500 kg [551 lbs., 1102 lbs. and 3307 lbs., respectively]. After bombing, each wave flew towards south-west.

Because the first three waves flew away to the south and to the west, scattered in many smaller groups, and since the 'Freya' radar station located at Chibavotsi village could detect effectively no more than one or two groups of enemy aircraft, the fourth wave was not noticed in time. Therefore, it took by surprise the fighter units, the anti-aircraft defence forces, as well as the anti-chemical defence. Many citizens had already left the shelters (...)"

Here's how the action of the Bulgarian fighter units is described in connection with the surprise fourth bombing wave:

"3/6. Iztrebiteľen Orlyak (3/6th Fighter Group), Bozhurishte airfield. By 11:00 a.m., the fighters are back [from combatting the third bombing wave. D.B.], landing one after the other. At the same time, a very delayed announcement for the incoming fourth wave of bombers targeting Sofia is received. Refilled with fuel



Aircraft No. 1 is being prepared for takeoff from Dolna Mitropoliya airfield in 1943. One can compare the two shades of the camouflage colour as seen on the port wing's leading edge with the monotone colour of the fuselage. Apparently, the darker shade matches the fuselage colour, reinforcing the Author's belief that the fuselage was painted RLM 70 Black Green, and not RLM 71 Dark Green as usually given by other sources.



Final waving prior to takeoff from Dolna Mitropoliya. The hole in the propeller spinner's centre is plugged, as the 2-cm, or 20-mm cannon, either HS 404, or Oerlikon FFS-20 type, meant to fire through it, was not supplied. A gull-wing PZL P.24 is seen in the background.

and reloaded with ammunition, the fighters take off. However, before they could reach the necessary flying height, the enemy bombers had already dropped their bombs and flew away to the south-west. This is why the fighters could not engage the enemy. (...)

2/6. Iztrebitelen Orlyak (2/6th Fighter Group), Vrazhdebna airfield. (...) The incoming fourth wave of enemy aircraft at 11:05 found the orlyak in process of refuelling, so it could not engage the enemy. (...)"

In Col. Velichkov's report there is no mention of the 1/6. Iztrebitelen Orlyak (1/6th Fighter Group), comprised of Dewoitine D.520s, based on Karlovo airfield, and the elusive 4/6. Iztrebitelen Orlyak, also flying the D.520. Only the *chetvorka* of Avia B-135¹¹ fighters of the Fighter School at Dolna Mitropoliya, flown by flight instructors, is mentioned at the end as having contacted the enemy. Indeed, apparently the four *impromptu* warriors were the only ones who actually combated in the air the unexpected fourth USAAF bombing wave. They were the commander of the Fighter School, *Kapitan Krăstyu Atanasov*, his wingman, *Podporuchik Dimităr Sotirov*¹², as well as *Podporuchik Petăr Manolev* along with his wingman, *Feldfebel Yordan Ferdinandov*¹³. Reportedly, they flew aircraft Nos. 3, 4, 8 and 11.

Retired Col. Krăstyu Atanasov, leader of the four-ship *chetvorka*, remembers: "On 30.03.44, we took off with four Avia B-135s from the Dolna Mitropoliya airfield. I took the decision all by myself [without specific order from the Headquarters of the VNVV. D.B.], as we had heard on the radio that our friends from the three [actually four. D.B.] fighter groups, armed with Bf 109s and D.520s, were having a hard time with the numerically superior enemy. I wanted to help them out as much as I could, as some of them were my former students.

We met the American bombers from the fourth wave, which were heading to Sofia from north-west, when they were already over the towns of Vratsa and Ferdinand, and were heading towards Stara Planina [the long mountain range that separates Bulgaria into northern and southern parts. D.B.]. We saw the last fighters of the 2/6. and 3/6. Orlyatsi landing for refuelling and re-arming at Vrazhdebna and Bozhurishte airfields after the hot combat over the capital. So, in this moment of surprise, there were only the four of us in the skies of Sofia facing some 60-70 enemy bombers. We had to do something, so I gave an order for attack. Some may ask how we had the courage to attack the well-armed dozens of 'Liberator' bombers with only our small calibre machine guns. Well, Sofia was burning under us. Also, I gathered courage from the fact that this bomber group had no fighter escort.

We attacked a few times, unsuccessfully. But near the town of Radomir, at the former frontier with Yugoslavia, after the Americans had released their bombs and were hurrying towards their bases to the south, they broke their compact formation. We 'stuck' to one bomber that lagged behind. I concentrated my fire on one of its engines. My bullets apparently hit the radial engine, as it started to burn. My wingman, Yordan Ferdinandov [see earlier footnote], managed to set on fire the nearest engine. The heavy machine started to lose height over the mountains.

Our joy was great – we had done it! We had shot down a 'Liberator'! One enemy less! With the last drops of fuel, we landed at Bozhurishte and reported the events."

Retired Col. Petăr Manolev – who flew aboard aircraft No. 4 that memorable day¹⁴ – also recalls the same event, which was his very first combat sortie and air combat: "As it was a rule for us to keep four Avia B-135 fighter trainers combat ready, we were prepared for a combat mission at any moment. On his own risk, *Kapitan Atanasov* ordered the four of us to take off against the enemy. All four airplanes of the alarm patrol took off almost simultaneously. Flying in the direction of Telish, in a right-hand curve, we were gaining height rapidly. We formed the combat formation during the climb by looking at each other, as there

11 Gen.-Maj. Dr. Yordan Milanov in his epic book, "Bulgarian air force at war (1912-1945)", published by 'Eăr Grup 2000' in 2008, mentions the aircraft type flown by the instructors as Avia B.534, which is an error.

12 Atanasov remembered long after the event that his wingman was *Feldfebel* Nedio Kolev, called Azmana, which is not supported by the victory award document.

13 According to Petăr Manolev's post-war memories, *Feldfebel* Yordan Ferdinandov was his wingman. Other sources give *Feldfebel* Nedio Kolev as his wingman.

14 Information taken from Manolev's logbook. The instructor pilot noted in his book: "combat task". It lasted one hour and fifteen minutes, from 10:15 to 11:30. Next day, he flew again No. 4, in a flight also listed in his logbook a 1-hr "combat task".



Judged by the vivid interest towards the aircraft and its pilot, it can be reasonable assumed that the flight which had just ended was an extraordinary one. Unfortunately, the aircraft's complete fuselage number is not visible, so it does not give a clue of the depicted event. However, the thick clothing worn by the airmen may refer to 30 March 1944, the day when the Avia B-135 fired its machine guns in anger for the first and last time. It is known that No. 11 did participate in that epic combat mission. The hangars in the background resemble those at Bozhurishte main air base. If true, it supports that the depicted events took place on 30 March, when the krilo leader and his wingman had to land on this airfield due to low fuel following a prolonged combat with an enemy bomber, which they reportedly damaged. Notice the two-tone wavy band visible on the port wing, in line with the right arm of the airman in centre.

was no radio connection between us. We reached 5,000 m in the area of Biala Slatina-Vratsa. About 1,000 m below us we discovered about 30-40 four-engine bombers, their airframes shining in the sun, heading towards [actually coming from] Sofia, without any fighter escort. In a 'right-side-step' style combat formation, we dove on the 'Fortresses' of the last group. Continuously firing our pair of small-calibre machine guns, each of us attacked the enemy from down-behind, immediately climbing for a second turn. However, the effect of our shots was negligible. Since our speed was almost identical to the bombers', it was difficult to reach them again. Chasing the enemy to the south-west, in the region of Pernik, we were attacked by our own flak, as we were mistakenly identified as enemy planes. We saved ourselves with a quick anti-flak manoeuvre repeated often at the school. The first pair had gone far ahead, chasing the enemy. As for my pair, I decided that we were nearing to the end of the Avia B-135's combat radius, therefore I signalled to my wingman to return to base – Dolna Mitropoliya. We landed there at 11:30 a.m. using up the last drops of fuel [According to his logbook, Manolev's flight lasted 75 min., from 10.15 a.m. to 11.30 a.m.]. The first pair later was compelled to land at Bozhurishte base, home of 3/6. Orlyak, as they had had used up all their fuel. There, Kapitan Atanasov reported the shooting down of a 'Fortress'.

My conclusion is the following: each pilot fired all his rounds, but we could not shoot down an enemy bomber regardless of the actual hits observed on the bomber's wings and fuselage, due to the ineffectiveness of our small-calibre armament."

Another participant in that day's events, retired Col. Yordan Ferdinandov says: "We were flying towards Sofia and from a long distance we saw the smoke over the city. We made a turn, looked around and, as we did not see any enemy airplanes, returned towards our airfield. We were near Vratsa when we saw a huge group of 'Liberators' just in front of us. Fortunately, they had no fighter escort. I made a sign to the commander. The order was to attack the airplane that lagged behind the formation. I didn't want to comment on the order, but I had my own doubts thinking about the difference in the armament even compared to a bomber. We attacked the lone airplane a few times. Soon, the right pair of engines started to smoke. The machine turned to the right, losing height, and five crewmembers jumped out, opening their parachutes. Soon after, the airplane fell to the ground, in the area between Trăn and Breznik.

Later on, Kpt. Atanasov was criticized for his decision, but also commended for his victory. When we returned to Dolna Mitropoliya, a lively discussion about the combat took place among all the instructors. When the Headquarters of the Văzdushni Voyski asked for the names of the four pilots, Atanasov thinking of some sort of reprisal for the unauthorized mission, called us and said: <<And now, what are we going to do with that combat flight?>>. I remember Petăr Manolev saying, that we were ready to share the responsibility with Atanasov, as we had just shown to our students how to enter a combat and how to get out of it with a victory. (...)"

Continuing with the report filed by Col. Velichkov: "(...) The Fighter School, based at Dolna Mitropoliya airfield: upon receiving the first announcement about incoming enemy bombers, spotted over the town of Tirana, Albania, the C/O of the School, Kapitan Krăstyu Atanasov, formed an 'Avia krilo'. The [ad-hoc formation] took off under his command in the direction of Vratsa and Berkovitsa. Here they met a group of

Excerpt from Por. Manolev's logbook for the last two days of March 1944. At left, "Boyna zadacha", i.e. "Combat task" is written (a term frequently used in other records as well, probably meaning patrolling). At right, "I. boyno krăshenie" is mentioned, which means "The 1st baptism of fire".

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| 10.15 | 11.30 | 12.40 | 13.10 | 14.30 | 15.15 | 16.00 | 17.00 | 18.00 | 19.00 | 20.00 | 21.00 | 22.00 | 23.00 | 24.00 | 25.00 | 26.00 | 27.00 | 28.00 | 29.00 | 30.00 | 31.00 | 32.00 | 33.00 | 34.00 | 35.00 | 36.00 | 37.00 | 38.00 | 39.00 | 40.00 | 41.00 | 42.00 | 43.00 | 44.00 | 45.00 | 46.00 | 47.00 | 48.00 | 49.00 | 50.00 | 51.00 | 52.00 | 53.00 | 54.00 | 55.00 | 56.00 | 57.00 | 58.00 | 59.00 | 60.00 | 61.00 | 62.00 | 63.00 | 64.00 | 65.00 | 66.00 | 67.00 | 68.00 | 69.00 | 70.00 | 71.00 | 72.00 | 73.00 | 74.00 | 75.00 | 76.00 | 77.00 | 78.00 | 79.00 | 80.00 | 81.00 | 82.00 | 83.00 | 84.00 | 85.00 | 86.00 | 87.00 | 88.00 | 89.00 | 90.00 | 91.00 | 92.00 | 93.00 | 94.00 | 95.00 | 96.00 | 97.00 | 98.00 | 99.00 | 100.00 | 101.00 | 102.00 | 103.00 | 104.00 | 105.00 | 106.00 | 107.00 | 108.00 | 109.00 | 110.00 | 111.00 | 112.00 | 113.00 | 114.00 | 115.00 | 116.00 | 117.00 | 118.00 | 119.00 | 120.00 | 121.00 | 122.00 | 123.00 | 124.00 | 125.00 | 126.00 | 127.00 | 128.00 | 129.00 | 130.00 | 131.00 | 132.00 | 133.00 | 134.00 | 135.00 | 136.00 | 137.00 | 138.00 | 139.00 | 140.00 | 141.00 | 142.00 | 143.00 | 144.00 | 145.00 | 146.00 | 147.00 | 148.00 | 149.00 | 150.00 | 151.00 | 152.00 | 153.00 | 154.00 | 155.00 | 156.00 | 157.00 | 158.00 | 159.00 | 160.00 | 161.00 | 162.00 | 163.00 | 164.00 | 165.00 | 166.00 | 167.00 | 168.00 | 169.00 | 170.00 | 171.00 | 172.00 | 173.00 | 174.00 | 175.00 | 176.00 | 177.00 | 178.00 | 179.00 | 180.00 | 181.00 | 182.00 | 183.00 | 184.00 | 185.00 | 186.00 | 187.00 | 188.00 | 189.00 | 190.00 | 191.00 | 192.00 | 193.00 | 194.00 | 195.00 | 196.00 | 197.00 | 198.00 | 199.00 | 200.00 | 201.00 | 202.00 | 203.00 | 204.00 | 205.00 | 206.00 | 207.00 | 208.00 | 209.00 | 210.00 | 211.00 | 212.00 | 213.00 | 214.00 | 215.00 | 216.00 | 217.00 | 218.00 | 219.00 | 220.00 | 221.00 | 222.00 | 223.00 | 224.00 | 225.00 | 226.00 | 227.00 | 228.00 | 229.00 | 230.00 | 231.00 | 232.00 | 233.00 | 234.00 | 235.00 | 236.00 | 237.00 | 238.00 | 239.00 | 240.00 | 241.00 | 242.00 | 243.00 | 244.00 | 245.00 | 246.00 | 247.00 | 248.00 | 249.00 | 250.00 | 251.00 | 252.00 | 253.00 | 254.00 | 255.00 | 256.00 | 257.00 | 258.00 | 259.00 | 260.00 | 261.00 | 262.00 | 263.00 | 264.00 | 265.00 | 266.00 | 267.00 | 268.00 | 269.00 | 270.00 | 271.00 | 272.00 | 273.00 | 274.00 | 275.00 | 276.00 | 277.00 | 278.00 | 279.00 | 280.00 | 281.00 | 282.00 | 283.00 | 284.00 | 285.00 | 286.00 | 287.00 | 288.00 | 289.00 | 290.00 | 291.00 | 292.00 | 293.00 | 294.00 | 295.00 | 296.00 | 297.00 | 298.00 | 299.00 | 300.00 | 301.00 | 302.00 | 303.00 | 304.00 | 305.00 | 306.00 | 307.00 | 308.00 | 309.00 | 310.00 | 311.00 | 312.00 | 313.00 | 314.00 | 315.00 | 316.00 | 317.00 | 318.00 | 319.00 | 320.00 | 321.00 | 322.00 | 323.00 | 324.00 | 325.00 | 326.00 | 327.00 | 328.00 | 329.00 | 330.00 | 331.00 | 332.00 | 333.00 | 334.00 | 335.00 | 336.00 | 337.00 | 338.00 | 339.00 | 340.00 | 341.00 | 342.00 | 343.00 | 344.00 | 345.00 | 346.00 | 347.00 | 348.00 | 349.00 | 350.00 | 351.00 | 352.00 | 353.00 | 354.00 | 355.00 | 356.00 | 357.00 | 358.00 | 359.00 | 360.00 | 361.00 | 362.00 | 363.00 | 364.00 | 365.00 | 366.00 | 367.00 | 368.00 | 369.00 | 370.00 | 371.00 | 372.00 | 373.00 | 374.00 | 375.00 | 376.00 | 377.00 | 378.00 | 379.00 | 380.00 | 381.00 | 382.00 | 383.00 | 384.00 | 385.00 | 386.00 | 387.00 | 388.00 | 389.00 | 390.00 | 391.00 | 392.00 | 393.00 | 394.00 | 395.00 | 396.00 | 397.00 | 398.00 | 399.00 | 400.00 | 401.00 | 402.00 | 403.00 | 404.00 | 405.00 | 406.00 | 407.00 | 408.00 | 409.00 | 410.00 | 411.00 | 412.00 | 413.00 | 414.00 | 415.00 | 416.00 | 417.00 | 418.00 | 419.00 | 420.00 | 421.00 | 422.00 | 423.00 | 424.00 | 425.00 | 426.00 | 427.00 | 428.00 | 429.00 | 430.00 | 431.00 | 432.00 | 433.00 | 434.00 | 435.00 | 436.00 | 437.00 | 438.00 | 439.00 | 440.00 | 441.00 | 442.00 | 443.00 | 444.00 | 445.00 | 446.00 | 447.00 | 448.00 | 449.00 | 450.00 | 451.00 | 452.00 | 453.00 | 454.00 | 455.00 | 456.00 | 457.00 | 458.00 | 459.00 | 460.00 | 461.00 | 462.00 | 463.00 | 464.00 | 465.00 | 466.00 | 467.00 | 468.00 | 469.00 | 470.00 | 471.00 | 472.00 | 473.00 | 474.00 | 475.00 | 476.00 | 477.00 | 478.00 | 479.00 | 480.00 | 481.00 | 482.00 | 483.00 | 484.00 | 485.00 | 486.00 | 487.00 | 488.00 | 489.00 | 490.00 | 491.00 | 492.00 | 493.00 | 494.00 | 495.00 | 496.00 | 497.00 | 498.00 | 499.00 | 500.00 | 501.00 | 502.00 | 503.00 | 504.00 | 505.00 | 506.00 | 507.00 | 508.00 | 509.00 | 510.00 | 511.00 | 512.00 | 513.00 | 514.00 | 515.00 | 516.00 | 517.00 | 518.00 | 519.00 | 520.00 | 521.00 | 522.00 | 523.00 | 524.00 | 525.00 | 526.00 | 527.00 | 528.00 | 529.00 | 530.00 | 531.00 | 532.00 | 533.00 | 534.00 | 535.00 | 536.00 | 537.00 | 538.00 | 539.00 | 540.00 | 541.00 | 542.00 | 543.00 | 544.00 | 545.00 | 546.00 | 547.00 | 548.00 | 549.00 | 550.00 | 551.00 | 552.00 | 553.00 | 554.00 | 555.00 | 556.00 | 557.00 | 558.00 | 559.00 | 560.00 | 561.00 | 562.00 | 563.00 | 564.00 | 565.00 | 566.00 | 567.00 | 568.00 | 569.00 | 570.00 | 571.00 | 572.00 | 573.00 | 574.00 | 575.00 | 576.00 | 577.00 | 578.00 | 579.00 | 580.00 | 581.00 | 582.00 | 583.00 | 584.00 | 585.00 | 586.00 | 587.00 | 588.00 | 589.00 | 590.00 | 591.00 | 592.00 | 593.00 | 594.00 | 595.00 | 596.00 | 597.00 | 598.00 | 599.00 | 600.00 | 601.00 | 602.00 | 603.00 | 604.00 | 605.00 | 606.00 | 607.00 | 608.00 | 609.00 | 610.00 | 611.00 | 612.00 | 613.00 | 614.00 | 615.00 | 616.00 | 617.00 | 618.00 | 619.00 | 620.00 | 621.00 | 622.00 | 623.00 | 624.00 | 625.00 | 626.00 | 627.00 | 628.00 | 629.00 | 630.00 | 631.00 | 632.00 | 633.00 | 634.00 | 635.00 | 636.00 | 637.00 | 638.00 | 639.00 | 640.00 | 641.00 | 642.00 | 643.00 | 644.00 | 645.00 | 646.00 | 647.00 | 648.00 | 649.00 | 650.00 | 651.00 | 652.00 | 653.00 | 654.00 | 655.00 | 656.00 | 657.00 | 658.00 | 659.00 | 660.00 | 661.00 | 662.00 | 663.00 | 664.00 | 665.00 | 666.00 | 667.00 | 668.00 | 669.00 | 670.00 | 671.00 | 672.00 | 673.00 | 674.00 | 675.00 | 676.00 | 677.00 | 678.00 | 679.00 | 680.00 | 681.00 | 682.00 | 683.00 | 684.00 | 685.00 | 686.00 | 687.00 | 688.00 | 689.00 | 690.00 | 691.00 | 692.00 | 693.00 | 694.00 | 695.00 | 696.00 | 697.00 | 698.00 | 699.00 | 700.00 | 701.00 | 702.00 | 703.00 | 704.00 | 705.00 | 706.00 | 707.00 | 708.00 | 709.00 | 710.00 | 711.00 | 712.00 | 713.00 | 714.00 | 715.00 | 716.00 | 717.00 | 718.00 | 719.00 | 720.00 | 721.00 | 722.00 | 723.00 | 724.00 | 725.00 | 726.00 | 727.00 | 728.00 | 729.00 | 730.00 | 731.00 | 732.00 | 733.00 | 734.00 | 735.00 | 736.00 | 737.00 | 738.00 | 739.00 | 740.00 | 741.00 | 742.00 | 743.00 | 744.00 | 745.00 | 746.00 | 747.00 | 748.00 | 749.00 | 750.00 | 751.00 | 752.00 | 753.00 | 754.00 | 755.00 | 756.00 | 757.00 | 758.00 | 759.00 | 760.00 | 761.00 | 762.00 | 763.00 | 764.00 | 765.00 | 766.00 | 767.00 | 768.00 | 769.00 | 770.00 | 771.00 | 772.00 | 773.00 | 774.00 | 775.00 | 776.00 | 777.00 | 778.00 | 779.00 | 780.00 | 781.00 | 782.00 | 783.00 | 784.00 | 785.00 | 786.00 | 787.00 | 788.00 | 789.00 | 790.00 | 791.00 | 792.00 | 793.00 | 794.00 | 795.00 | 796.00 | 797.00 | 798.00 | 799.00 | 800.00 | 801.00 | 802.00 | 803.00 | 804.00 | 805.00 | 806.00 | 807.00 | 808.00 | 809.00 | 810.00 | 811.00 | 812.00 | 813.00 | 814.00 | 815.00 | 816.00 | 817.00 | 818.00 | 819.00 | 820.00 | 821.00 | 822.00 | 823.00 | 824.00 | 825.00 | 826.00 | 827.00 | 828.00 | 829.00 | 830.00 | 831.00 | 832.00 | 833.00 | 834.00 | 835.00 | 836.00 | 837.00 | 838.00 | 839.00 | 840.00 | 841.00 | 842.00 | 843.00 | 844.00 | 845.00 | 846.00 | 847.00 | 848.00 | 849.00 | 850.00 | 851.00 | 852.00 | 853.00 | 854.00 | 855.00 | 856.00 | 857.00 | 858.00 | 859.00 | 860.00 | 861.00 | 862.00 | 863.00 | 864.00 | 865.00 | 866.00 | 867.00 | 868.00 | 869.00 | 870.00 | 871.00 | 872.00 | 873.00 | 874.00 | 875.00 | 876.00 | 877.00 | 878.00 | 879.00 | 880.00 | 881.00 | 882.00 | 883.00 | 884.00 | 885.00 | 886.00 | 887.00 | 888.00 | 889.00 | 890.00 | 891.00 | 892.00 | 893.00 | 894.00 | 895.00 | 896.00 | 897.00 | 898.00 | 899.00 | 900.00 | 901.00 | 902.00 | 903.00 | 904.00 | 905.00 | 906.00 | 907.00 | 908.00 | 909.00 | 910.00 | 911.00 | 912.00 | 913.00 | 914.00 | 915.00 | 916.00 | 917.00 | 918.00 | 919.00 | 920.00 | 921.00 | 922.00 | 923.00 | 924.00 | 925.00 | 926.00 | 927.00 | 928.00 | 929.00 | 930.00 | 931.00 | 932.00 | 933.00 | 934.00 | 935.00 | 936.00 | 937.00 | 938.00 | 939.00 | 940.00 | 941.00 | 942.00 | 943.00 | 944.00 | 945.00 | 946.00 | 947.00 | 948.00 | 949.00 | 950.00 | 951.00 | 952.00 | 953.00 | 954.00 | 955.00 | 956.00 | 957.00 | 958.00 | 959.00 | 960.00 | 961.00 | 962.00 | 963.00 | 964.00 | 965.00 | 966.00 | 967.00 | 968.00 | 969.00 | 970.00 | 971.00 | 972.00 | 973.00 | 974.00 | 975.00 | 976.00 | 977.00 | 978.00 | 979.00 | 980.00 | 981.00 | 982.00 | 983.00 | 984.00 | 985.00 | 986.00 | 987.00 | 988.00 | 989.00 | 990.00 | 991.00 | 992.00 | 993.00 | 994.00 | 995.00 | 996.00 | 997.00 | 998.00 | 999.00 | 1000.00 |
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A group of airmen pose in front of administration building at Dolna Mitropoliya. The top cover aft of engine cowlings and the side cover are removed, probably for ammunition replenishment. The thin light circle around the air intake under the propeller spinner is noteworthy.



enemy bombers. They engaged it and chased it towards Radomir, returning to the airfield on the conclusion of the engagement. The four [pilots] probably shot down one enemy bomber. (...)

It can be noted that the report mentions one USAAF bomber “probably shot down”. Indeed, the official list of Bulgarian air victories mentions Atanasov and Sotirov with one point each, received for “attacking a four-engine bomber, which started to smoke and left the formation”. Since the USAAF bomber reportedly crashed into the territory of Yugoslavia, in the mountains, where Tito’s Communist partisans operated, the exact crash site could not be located. This automatically led to the claim being confirmed only as ‘probable victory’. To complete the overall picture of that rather busy day, although in the order of Col. Velichkov only three enemy airplanes are mentioned as shot down, later it has been found that

Rudimentary field maintenance of the rarely seen No. 4. Judged by the thick clothing the airmen and technicians are wearing, the photo was taken during the autumn/winter of 1943, or early 1944. There is no visible indicator that would point that this aircraft had made a belly landing, which would necessitate the on-site intervention. A plausible explanation is that the pilot successfully landed his aircraft wheels down on the first available spot, after it had exhausted its fuel stock. The light-coloured box on the side of the nose section is the ammunition storage container.





The last Avia impressed in Bulgarian service. The machine gun compartment's cover is not fastened yet. The administration building at Dolna Mitropoliya air base is visible at right. Notice the smooth, glossy surface of the round oil tank cover, located in the port wing leading edge's root.

the real number is, in fact, five (four bombers and one fighter). The day's total number of 'probable' bomber victory claims – including the reported victim of the Avias, a 'Flying Fortress'¹⁵ – was ten.

USAAF documents reveal that day there were four 4-engine bombers lost over Bulgaria/Yugoslavia:

- B-24H, #4252519, from the 450th BG, at 08:49 hours,
- B-17G, #4231683, from the 2nd BG, at 10:01 hours,
- B-17G, #4231851, from the 2nd BG, at 10:01 hours (mid-air collision with the other B-17G),
- B-17F, #4230465, from the 301st BG, at 12:45 hours.

From the above list it would appear that the aircraft of the 301st BG (419th BS), piloted by 1st Lieutenant William C. Miller, was most likely the one claimed by *Kapitan* Atanasov. The aircraft was nicknamed "Vagabond" and is listed as "lost during mission to Bulgaria, at Uleine (?), 36 miles [about 58 km] of Sofia". All ten crewmembers became POW (Prisoner of War). However, even if this particular bomber was not the victim of the Avias, there were a few other USAAF bombers damaged in combat over the area where the Bulgarian patrol clashed with the intruders, which did return to their base in Italy. This could raise the possibility of one of them being the actual – and only – victim of the Avia B-135.

Epilogue

This *mêlée* involving the four-aircraft Bulgarian fighter formation and a stranded USAAF bomber was actually the swansong of the short-lived Avia B-135.

Confidential Order No. 17/13.07.1944 prescribes the establishment of a department for aircraft and engine repair at DSF-Lovech. Among the aircraft types listed to be repaired there was, along the Ju 87, Ju 52 and the BMW 132 engine, "the Avia-135 and its Avia 12Yczs engine" (sic! probably a typo, a 'z' written instead of 'r'). At that time, the flight instructors based at Dolna Mitropoliya occasionally still flew the Avia B-135, as given testimony by Petăr Manolev's logbook (see on-line annex).

By the end of 1944, with the imminent influx of new Soviet technology after the Bulgarian about-face of 9 September, the little-flown, modest Avia monoplanes¹⁶ were withdrawn from service and stored in the open, in a forgotten corner of Dolna Mitropoliya airfield. Indeed, a report dated 27 June 1946, listing the findings at the 22. *Shturmovi Orlyak* (22nd Assault Group) based at Dolna Mitropoliya, mentions – along with several damaged Il-2s – the following: "The Avia-135 aircraft are hardly maintained, which left them in poor condition." Their sad end came shortly afterwards, when they were scrapped, then reportedly used as targets in air-to-ground shooting practice.

¹⁵ During the war, Bulgarian airmen regularly called 'Fortress' – or 'Flying Fortress' – every 4-engine USAAF bomber, sometime even the 2-engine B-25 'Marauder'.

¹⁶ From 23 August 1945, the aircraft type was officially identified with the AV code, thus still considered.



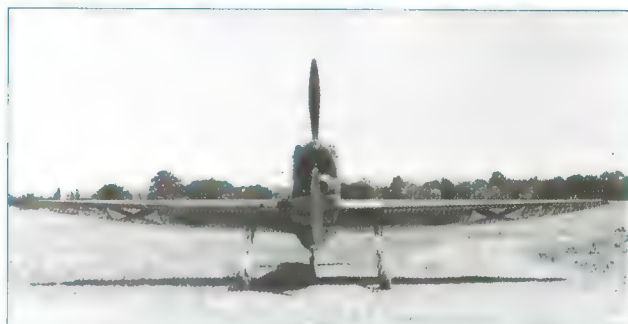
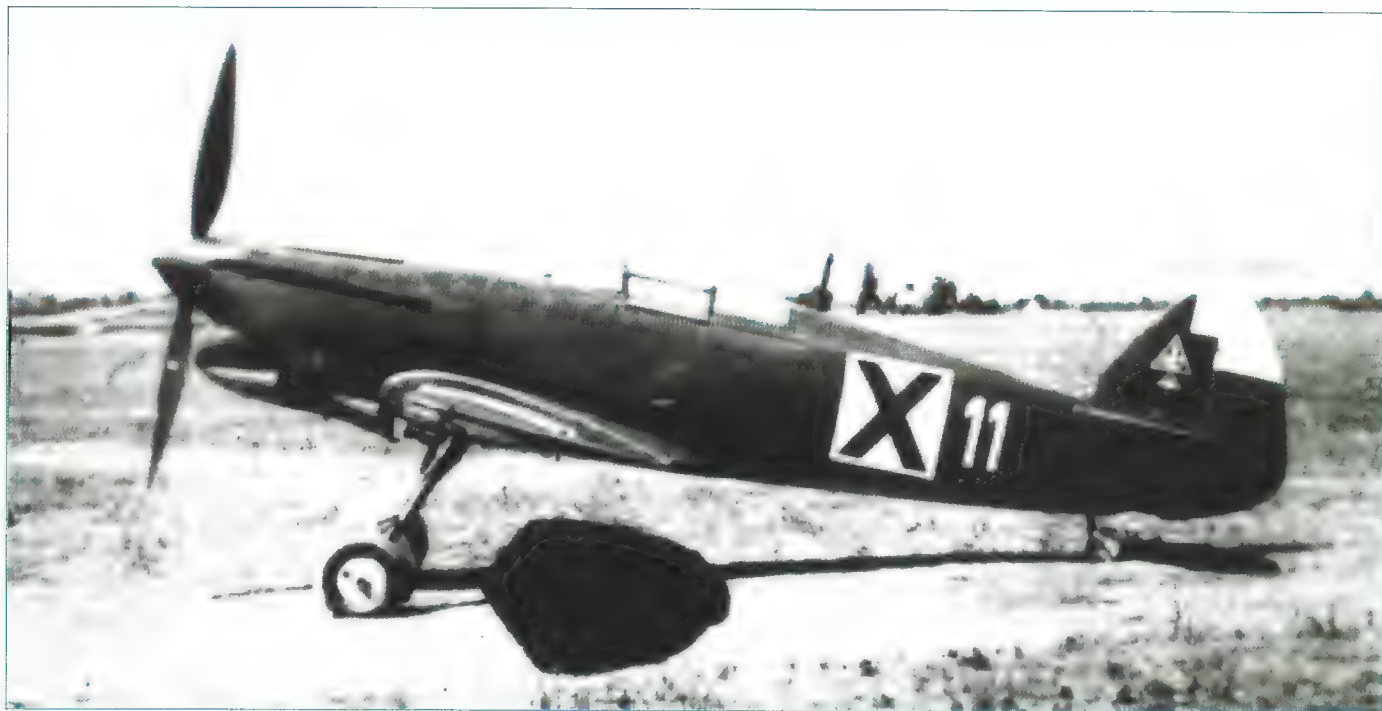
This poor-quality photo of aircraft No. 7, parked and anchored down at the edge of Dolna Mitropoliya airfield sometime in 1945, shows a Bulgarian paratrooper clad in camouflage uniform and wearing a steel helmet typical to this élite army branch. At that date, the Avia B-135s were seldom flown, if at all.

Colours and Markings

When the Bulgarians spotted the first Avia B-35 prototype for the first time in February 1939, it was painted in a three-tone upper camouflage scheme consisting of Sand Yellow, Dark Green and Dark Brown, over Light Grey on the undersurfaces – typical of the new Czechoslovak camouflage scheme. The second prototype sported a much less eye-catching scheme of natural metal overall. This is the livery it kept after the Germans took over the Avia Works in late March 1939. The third prototype of the B-35 (which would be renamed B-135.1), test flown by the Bulgarians in May-June 1940, was finished in the same fashion. It wore the standard *Luftwaffe* markings on the wings, fuselage and tail. However, the second B-135, registered D-IBPP, was finished in RLM-Grey (RLM 02) overall. At one point, this uniform colour gave way to two colours, most probably Black Green (RLM 70), over Light Blue (RLM 65). The finish of these colours was matt. The black civilian registration received a thin white (or light grey) outline, for better visibility. This prototype served as pattern for the short-run Bulgarian production, as well as for the camouflage scheme.

The first series production aircraft, *Werknummer* (*Tov. čís.*) 101, registered D-IWKM, performed its maiden flight at the Avia AG on 7 April 1942. It was finished in what appears to be Black Green over Light Blue, as described above. Later on, Dark Green (RLM 71) wavy areas were applied on the wings and horizontal stabilisers. This may have been done in Bulgaria, when large spots on the wings were cleaned of corrosion during assembly, and those areas had to be repainted. The fuselage remained Black Green (check the differences in shades on photo on page 157). This was the colour scheme the Avia B-135s wore in the spring of 1943. And this is how they also looked – albeit fatigued – when they were retired from active service in 1945.

The identification of the dozen aircraft was straightforward as well. They received serial numbers from 1 to 12, corresponding to the original construction number's last one or two digits. The serial numbers were applied in white on the rear fuselage, and in black on the wing under surface. The rudder was painted in the Bulgarian tricolour, as per an early standard valid at the time when the contract was signed in early 1940 – already obsolete by the time the airframes arrived in Bulgaria three years later – but was not modified as per the latest low visibility standard. The peculiar Bulgarian triangle was applied on the mid-fin, in white, including the erroneous NN of 7057 (already used by the Bf 109Gs that had entered service earlier)! There is no confirmation of any additional markings or colours (including the theoretically mandatory Axis yellow) used by the Avia B-135s in their lacklustre two-year service in Bulgaria.



Four views of aircraft No. 11 in active service.

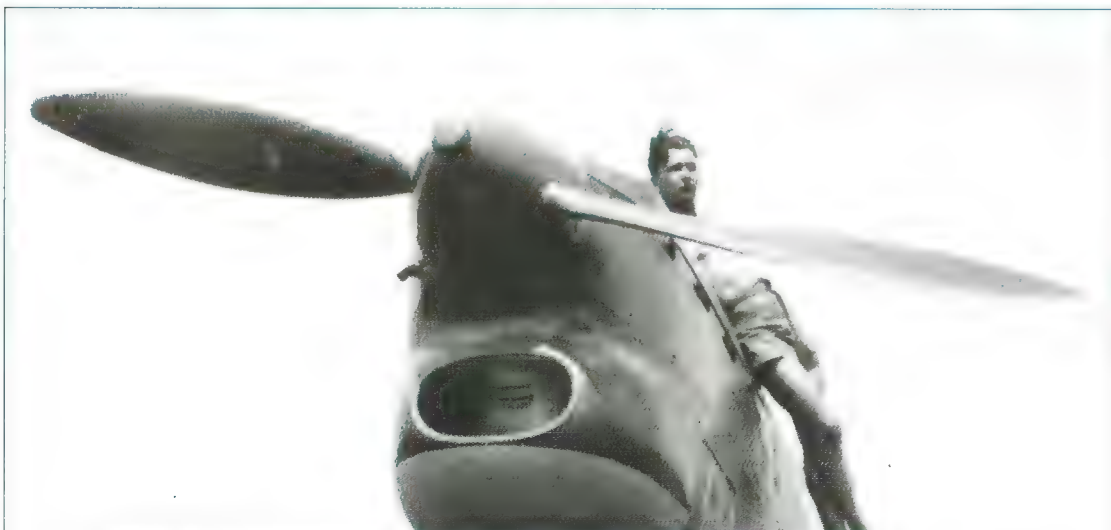


This and next page. A series of photos taken by what is believed to be Yunker (Cadet) Pancho Panchev of the 65th Vipusk (Class) of His Majesty's Military School, depicting a series of Avia B-135 fighter trainers (Nos. 7, 11 and 12) at Dolna Mitropoliya air base, in June 1944. On the photo at right, an anonymous D.520, relegated to trainer duty, can be spotted in the background.





<http://mmpbooks.biz/assets/BFC/2-02.pdf>



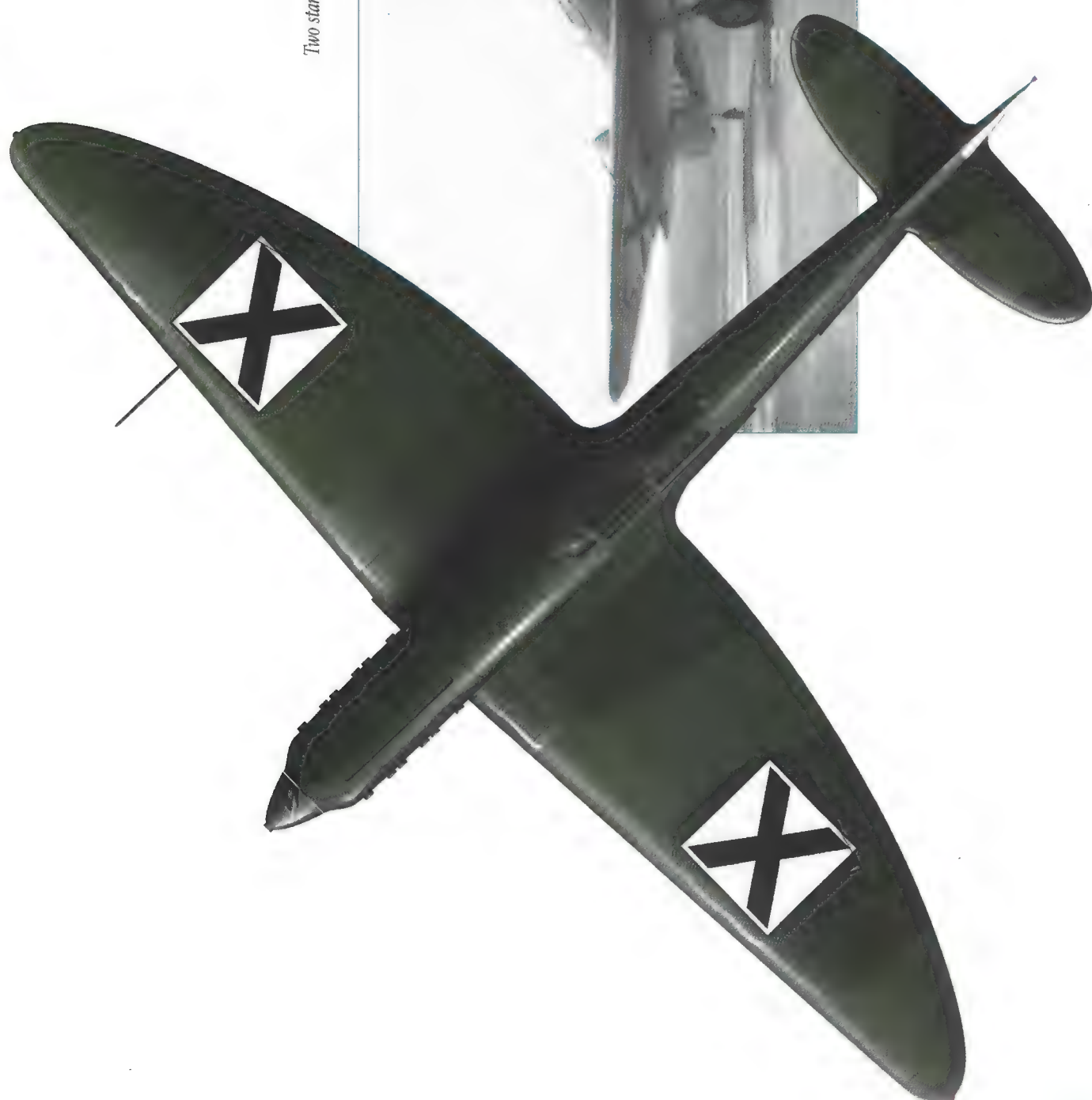


Balázs Kakuk



Avia B-135 (WNr. 105), No. 5, 5/7057, Podporučik Petăr Manolev, Iztrebitel-nata Shkola (Fighter School), Dolna Mitropoliya, May 1944. Camouflage colours: Fuselage in Black Green (RLM 70). Wings and horizontal stabilisers dull Dark Green (RLM 71), with glossy Black Green (RLM 70) wavy bands. Light Blue (RLM 65) under surfaces. Spinner and propeller blades in Black Green (RLM 70). Black band around exhaust pipes. National marking in six positions. Rudder in Bulgarian tricolour (White, Green, Red). Factory logo on mid-fin.

Two standard views of Avia B-135, No. 5, used for an official identification card.





Balázs Kakuk



Avia B-135 (W.Nr. 103), No. 3, 3/7057, Kapitán Krásný Atanasov, Iztrebiteľná Škola (Fighter School), Dolná Mitropoliya, late August 1943. Camouflage colours: Fuselage in Black Green (RLM 70). Wings and horizontal stabilisers dull Dark Green (RLM 71), with glossy Black Green (RLM 70) wavy bands. Light Blue (RLM 65) under surfaces. Spinner and propeller blades in Black Green (RLM 70). Black band around exhaust pipes. National marking in six positions. Rudder in Bulgarian tricolour (White, Green, Red). Factory logo on mid-fin.

Fine silhouette study of the Avia B-135 fighter.

Dewoitine D.520

Fighter *à la française* with Balkan Flavour

Following the unexpected American air raid against Rumania by 13 B-24 'Liberator' bombers on 12 June 1942 (Operation 'HALPRO'), it became obvious to Berlin what Sofia had demanded for some time: the air defence of Bulgaria needed to be strengthened. At that time, the most modern fighter aircraft the Bulgarians could muster was the Messerschmitt Bf 109E, a type which was already *passé* by the latest standards. The handful of *Emils* were complemented by the more numerous, but hopelessly outdated, Avia B.534 biplanes. Additionally, the Polish P.24s, the German pre-war He 51s and Ar 65s were also listed in the VNVV order of battle – these being used only as fighter trainers. In view of this dire situation as the fighter force regards, the Bulgarians requested from Berlin in late 1942 54 Bf 109Gs, enough to equip a three-squadron strong new fighter group, plus staff flight. However, the request was flatly turned down by the Germans, themselves in great need of every combat-ready fighter aircraft.

The aforementioned shock US bombing of Rumania changed the German leaders' minds, however. They realised that it was only a matter of time until the American bombers would return, and their flight path towards the strategic Ploesti oilfields would certainly cross Bulgarian airspace. They now heeded the Bulgarians' demands. Accordingly, besides freeing a small batch of modern German fighters for urgent dispatch as a stop-gap measure, Berlin also lifted the ban on French arms delivery to its major Balkan ally. Previously, from late 1941, the Bulgarians had tried in vain to obtain from Vichy France 20 Morane-Saulnier MS.406 C1 fighters (eventually sold to Finland). Then, after cancelling the order on 15 September 1942, they attempted to obtain an equal number of the superior Bloch MB.152 C1 in early 1943¹, which also did not in the event materialise. This was due to a note by which Germany informed the Vichy Government that all French military equipment, including the 20 MB.152s offered to Bulgaria, was requisitioned to support the defence of Europe.

As noted earlier, initially, in late 1942, the Bulgarians requested 54 Messerschmitt Bf 109Gs to equip a new fighter group. Berlin rejected this request. However, due to the changing strategic situa-

One of the recently built D.520s, seen in France, basking in the sun in the summer of 1943. The propeller spinner is yellow, as appears to be the tail surface and the lower engine cowlings as well. The propeller blades are painted matte black, rather than being left in bare metal as was usually the case. There is no gunsight installed behind the windscreen, thus the aircraft is probably not armed. The rearward foldable ventral antenna mast is missing, as it was on all machines given to Bulgaria. The last two letters of the Stammkennzeichen (Stkz.), GW, are visible on the rear fuselage. Accordingly, the first two letters were most probably SV. Photo taken on 4 June 1943.

¹ Bulgarian reference: "Contract with the French company O.F.E.M.A.-Paris, dated 19.02.1943, to supply 20 fighters, type 'Blok 152', fitted with 'Gnom-Ron' engine type '14-25'".



Hauptquartier, den 1.8.1943.

Euer Majestät !

Wir ist es eine besondere Freude, Ihnen mitzuteilen, dass ich befohlen habe, der Kgl. Bulgarischen Luftwaffe

100 Dewoitine Jagdmaschinen Type 520 einschl. der dafür notwendigen Ersatzteile usw.

zu übereignen.

Diese Flugzeuge werden außer der von Seiten der deutschen Luftwaffe übernommenen sonstigen Verpflichtung als Geschenk zur Verfügung gestellt.

Mit aufrichtiger Verbundenheit

Euer Majestät
ergebenster

H. Göring

An
Seine Majestät
König Boris von Bulgarien,

*Donation letter signed by
Göring on 1 August 1943,
sent to King Boris of Bulgaria,
detailing the offer of 100
D.520s, along with spare
parts, given as gift.*

g. Kdo.), called for the delivery, free of charge, of 100 Dewoitine D.520s – the best French fighter aircraft built in series, still available in significant number.

Following the takeover by the Germans of the still unoccupied area of defeated France (the so-called 'Southern Zone') in November 1942, a total of 1,876 French aircraft of various makes and models were captured. Of these, 246 were Dewoitine D.520s (only 182 of them airworthy). They also found 169 D.520s about 85% complete at the S.N.C.A.S.-E. factory in St. Martin du Touch. The Germans ordered the factory to complete 130 of these, and also to repair a further 125, which had been collected from various parts of the country. Nineteen of the newly produced aircraft were completed and flight tested before the French-run S.N.C.A.S.-E. facilities were closed in December 1942. However, three weeks later, the French plant resumed its activity, under German control. Eventually, S.N.C.A.S.-E. at St. Martin du Touch rebuilt a total of 48 former Vichy Air Force D.520s for the *Luftwaffe*, between November 1942 and June 1943. Also, the plant re-opened the assembly line for that type again, and manufactured a total of 128 D.520s. All were delivered by the end of 1943. Many from this batch went to Bulgaria². Later on, S.N.C.A.S.-E. facilities were needed for a different task; therefore, the D.520 programme was transferred to the Morane-Saulnier factory at Ossun (also working under S.N.C.A.S.-E. coordination). There, ten D.520s were fully repaired by 10 March 1944. That day, the plant and some sixty D.520s – including the ten finished D.520s – were completely destroyed by an Eighth Air Force air attack³. Of the surviving airframes and spare parts, nine 'hodgepodge' aircraft were completed by early August 1944 and reportedly sent off to Sofia, Bulgaria. The quoted report notes that *"these had been repaired two or three times, and were regarded by the French as useless from a military point of view"*. It is questionable if these latecomer D.520s actually reached Bulgaria, however, as there is no trace in Bulgarian documents studied by the Author of any French aircraft being delivered so late in the war.

A German report issued by *Ob. d. L. Genst. Gen. Q. 6. Abt. (III B)*, dated 4 July 1943, sent to RLM – *Chef AW*, states that 46 of the 96 D.520s set to be delivered to Bulgaria are parked at S.N.C.A.S.-E. Toulouse in St. Martin du Touch, and ready to be ferried. Of the rest of the 50 aircraft earmarked for

tion and following backstage political manoeuvring, the *Führer* eventually agreed, in principle, to help his trustworthy Balkan ally. Therefore, the *Chef des Generalstabes der Luftwaffe* (Chief of the *Luftwaffe* General Staff), *Generaloberst* Hans Jeschonnek, was informed of Hitler's wish by a letter dated 12 January 1943, and instructed to find a way to equip the Bulgarian air force with aircraft enough for a fighter regiment. Accordingly, a counter-offer was issued on 29 March, calling for 48 French Dewoitine D.520s, instead of the coveted Bf 109Gs, badly needed by the *Luftwaffe* itself. This offer was later on beefed up to 96 aircraft, to be delivered in two batches of 48 each. This would be enough for a two-group fighter regiment (*polk*), totalling six squadrons. This offer was however initially rejected by the Bulgarians, insisting their earlier request for a group of Bf 109Gs to be fulfilled. In the end, a deal was struck, which included 16 Bf 109G-2s (one squadron) for immediate delivery and 96 D.520s to be delivered in the latter half of the year.

Due to Berlin's aforementioned change of stance, the avenue of obtaining French aviation *matériel* suddenly opened. Not only the Bulgarians could now expect a sizeable shipment of badly needed fighter aircraft, but it turned out that the entire lot of D.520s, beefed up to 100 aircraft, were actually given to them as gift by the *Luftwaffe's* chief, Hermann Göring! Indeed, the donation document, signed by the *Reichsmarschall* [Verfügung (I) Nr. 1115/43

2 Besides the aircraft shipped to Bulgaria, Italy also received about 75 aircraft, while the rest was retained by the *Luftwaffe* as fighter trainer.

3 A post-war assessment of the French aircraft industry under German control sums up the total production & repair of D.520s at S.N.C.A.S.-E., Toulouse, at 178 aircraft. The number of complete aircraft built at Morane-Saulnier factory in Ossun was put at nil [Appendix 4 of C.I.O.S. Report on German Activities in the French Aircraft Industry (23.12.1944-19.01.1945)].



The over 100 D.520s marked for delivery to Bulgaria did not come from the same production batch, although a certain pattern can be observed, based on their construction numbers and German Stammkennzeichen. For example, most of the row assigned with the NE+H_Stkz. went to Bulgaria, although some were allotted to the Luftwaffe's JG 101, JG 103 and JG 105, units mostly based in occupied France. One of these exceptions was NE+HZ, flown by Obergefreiter Karl-Georg Genth with I./JG 101, based at Pau, in February 1944. Notice the all-yellow tail surface and the aircraft's individual number, Yellow 94, painted over the last two letters of the Stkz. The camouflage colours appear to be standard Luftwaffe greys (RLM 74/75), over light blue (RLM 76). The overall pristine look of the airframe is noteworthy.

Bulgaria, 20 would be soon ready⁴, while the rest would become available in Toulouse. Yet another document issued by the same central Luftwaffe office six days later, this time sent to DLM Bulgarien, curiously states the following: "Mr. Reichsmarschall [i.e., Göring] has decided to loan 46 Dévoitine 520s to the Bulgarians for training purposes⁵." Despite the contradictory German documents in this early phase, a top level decision had been made to offer the Bulgarians, for free, the French fighter aircraft not needed for the Luftwaffe's own purpose.

Based on a German technical document detailing the conditions of the D.520 handover to the Bulgarians, as well as all accessories and spare parts, all aircraft were 'fabrikneu', i.e., brand new production (see annex), thus *not* refurbished ex-Armée de l'Air machines as many published sources claim. Another report from July mentions that the 96 D.520s gifted by Göring to the Bulgarian King have to be assembled and ferried as soon as possible. To perform this urgent task, the assistance of GL/Verb. Stelle Paris (Mr. Langusch) and Beutepark Nanterre (Chief Engineer Rhöm) was sought.

In anticipation of the arrival of the D.520s to "Tsarstvo Bălgariya", a special committee was formed by Lieutenant Colonel Vălkov, flight engineer Petkov and mechanical engineer Tsolov. Also, 40 Bulgarian pilots were posted to Jagdgeschwader 107, located in Nancy, France, for training in August and September 1943. They finished the conversion course on 30 September and returned home, just in time as the bulk of D.520s had arrived in Bulgaria, to Karlovo airfield. One of the Luftwaffe pilots to ferry a D.520 to Bulgaria was Lt. Wolfgang Fischer, member of JG 107. At an unspecified date in early autumn of 1943, he flew TI+RJ from Toulouse to Sofia. JGr Ost ferried Nos. 837 and 839. Five flight instructors and several Air France airliner pilots would also help with the transfer. Luftflottenkommando 3 (Lfl. Kdo. 3) was in charge of the overall execution and safety of the ferry flight.

A German document dated 16 August 1943, related to the 100 'Dévoitine' aircraft offered as gift by Herr Reichsmarschall to the Tsar of Bulgaria, specifies that after the dispatch of 15 to Nancy [to train Bulgarian pilots], the remaining 85 aircraft [parked on Toulouse St. Martin du Touch base] have to be ferried not only to Wels, but all the way to Sofia-East airfield. These 85 aircraft have to be delivered to the end station no later than 15 September.

A telegram dated 10 September 1943 mentions that 18 D.520s departed from Nancy, with Bulgarian pilots at the controls, led by Hauptmann Hollweg. Two more aircraft will take off on 10 September. Two aircraft force-landed on Malmsheim due to engine troubles, while another two at landed at Böblingen, due to the same cause. Fourteen machines landed safely at Fürstenfeldbruck.

Certain Bulgarian sources claim that while en-route from France to Bulgaria, several airmen (variously identified as French or Bulgarian pilots) chose to land in neutral Switzerland, to escape war. However, the Author found no trace of any D.520 interned in Switzerland; therefore, this story is most probably untrue, like so many other published details regarding the history of Bulgarian aviation.

By 25 September 1943, all aircraft of the first batch, consisting of 48 D.520s and 41 more from the second batch, landed on Karlovo air base, located about 120 km east of Sofia⁶. The pristine-looking aircraft, all wearing Luftwaffe markings and four-letter black radio codes (Stammkennzeichen, abbreviated

4 A note at the bottom of the letter also states: "The order to build 37 Bloch 155 [fighter] aircraft was cancelled". It's unclear if this note is related to Bulgaria, or not; however, the document is part of the collection of Z.d.A. Bulgarien.

5 In original: "Der Herr Reichsmarschall hat entschieden, dass den Bulgaren 46 Dévoitine 520 zu Schulungszwecken leihweise zur Verfügung gestellt werden."

6 A note from the General Information Office of Haute-Garonne, dated 4 September 1943, states that the French factory workers approached by the Germans with the offer to go to Bulgaria, promising them daily wage of 400 francs, had all refused. The same note indicates the recent departure of a lot of D.520s for Bulgaria ("a few days since").

D.520, TI+RJ, was flown by Lt. Wolfgang Fischer, member of JG 107, from Toulouse to Sofia at an unspecified date in early autumn of 1943.



as *Stkz.*), were officially handed over to the VNVV during a pompous ceremony in the same month. Known *Stkz.* of aircraft that went to Bulgaria are: DN+VH (c/n 833), NE+HG (c/n 745), NT+QE (c/n 807), NU+BP (c/n 837), NU+BQ (c/n 829), NU+BR (c/n 836), NU+BS (c/n 839), NU+BV (c/n 841), TI+RJ, TI+RU. A German source lists almost all D.520s in the NE+H_ row as delivered to Bulgaria in September 1943 (starting with NE+HC, then D, E, F, I, J, L, N, O, P, Q, S, T, U, V, X; W.Nr. from 741 to 763). Notice that G is one of the missing ones; however, that one is confirmed by a photograph taken en-route to Bulgaria. Based on this information, this batch of recently built, but used, aircraft that were handed over to the Bulgarians originally went to I./JG 101, JG 103 (NE+HB, seen there in June 1943) and JG 105 (NE+HA, K, M, R, V, all known to be used with these units in July 1943). For the list of all known construction numbers, see annex 3.

The total number of D.520s in Bulgarian service is usually given by various publications as 89, 96, or 114, or even 150. In fact, of the total of 114 D.520s originally slated to be exported to Bulgaria, only 100 eventually arrived and were used by the VNVV⁷. This latter number is supported by a VNVV write-off

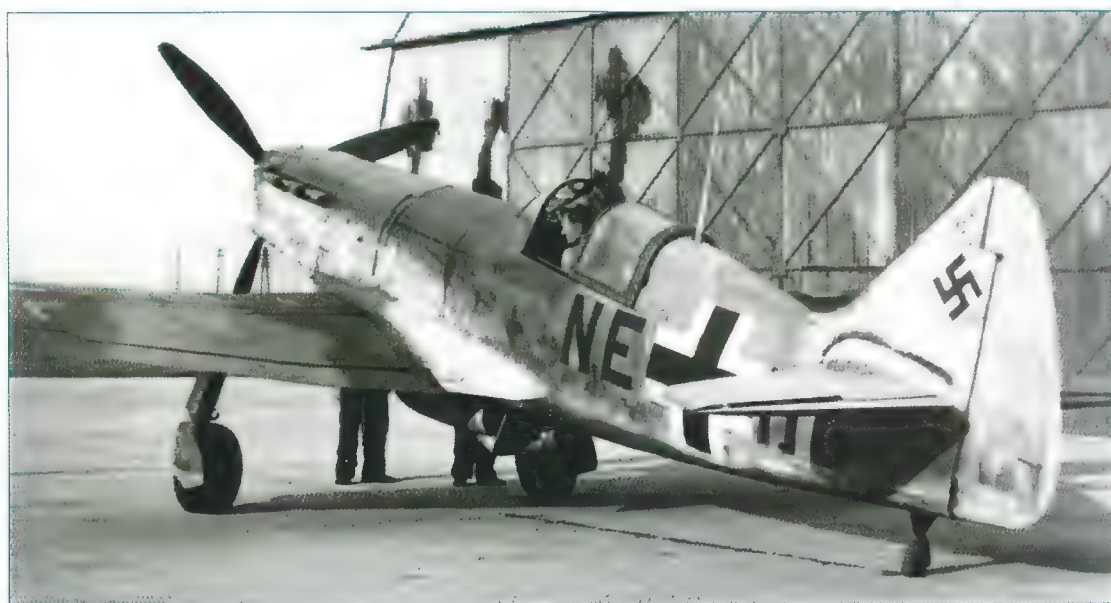
⁷ A Luftwaffe document of September 1944 mentions the following: *Lieferumfang 114 D.520. Ausgeliefert 100* (*Lieferumfang*=scope of delivery, *ausgeliefert*=delivered). According to the same document, at the time of the Bulgarians' 'betrayal' (i.e., 9 September 1944), approximately 40 D.520 were believed to be still airworthy.

This pair of D.520s was employed by I./JG 105, reportedly in Châteaudun, or Chartres, France, in the summer of 1943. Most Dewoitine fighters in the NE+H_ row ended up in Bulgaria. However, NE+HK (W.Nr. 748), reportedly manufactured at SNCASE in Bagnères-de-Bigorre in 1943, was an exception, as it was destroyed on Villacoublay-North, during an Allied bombing raid on 14 July 1943.





This D.520, NE+HG, was photographed on the tarmac of Borovo airfield, Croatia, en-route to Bulgaria in the autumn of 1943. On the top of the tail, the aircraft's construction number, 745, can be barely seen. This particular aircraft certainly had an interesting paint scheme. The shade of the darker camouflage colour applied on the port wing appears to be darker than on the fuselage or wing root. It could be that it was a replacement wing, taken from another, older aircraft. The camouflage pattern on the wing is not the standard 'splinter' type either, but unusually 'wavy', leading to the assumption that it may have been done based on French standards and with French colours. The wing cross with a thin white border is odd, too. The rear fuselage spine, aft the cockpit, was painted in a lighter camouflage colour than the front of the fuselage top, and does not match the lighter colour on the wing, either. Finally, the paint on the tail surface appears even lighter, might have very well been yellow, including the $\frac{3}{4}$ of the rudder.



document of aircraft No. 100, dated 1 August 1944 (no higher NN was found in the military archives). The lot of 100 "gift" aircraft was officially handed over to the Bulgarians on 16 November 1943⁸.

Contrary to VNVV custom, the Dewoitine D.520 C1 aircraft type did not receive a code name when they entered active service. Instead, it was simply referred to in documents by its transliterated French name: ДевоатинЪ ('Devoatin'). Despite this anomaly, the fighter type did receive a *Nomenklaturen Nummer* class, the last one for a wartime fighter type in VNVV service: 7077, indicating the eighth such type.

Unit Structure

In October 1943, the freshly delivered D.520s were assigned to 2/6. *Iztrebitelen Orlyak* (2/6th Fighter Group), C/O *Kapitan* Nikolay S. Boshnakov, part of 6. *Iztrebitelen Polk* (6th Fighter Regiment), based at Karlovo. 2/6. *Orlyak* comprised the following three *iztrebitelni yata* (fighter squadrons): 642nd, 652nd and 662nd, completed by a *shtabno krilo* (staff flight, four-aircraft command unit). The D.520s replaced the old Avia B.534 *Dogan* biplanes in the group's roster. By early November, the 2/6. Fighter Group had, on paper, 34 trained pilots (ten per squadron, plus four attached to the staff flight).

On 25 November, 662. *Yato* (the first combat-ready D.520-equipped squadron), commanded by *Poruchik* Asen D. Kovachev, moved to Vrazhdebna airfield, where the squadron was temporarily taken over by 3/6. *Orlyak*, equipped with Bf 109Gs. From there, the squadron moved briefly to Skopje⁹, to the south-west of 'Greater Bulgaria', in anticipation of the allied air attacks that would be coming from that direction. In mid-December, the remaining two squadrons of the 2/6. Fighter Group, the 642nd and the 652nd, also relocated to Vrazhdebna, to provide air defence for the capital. The combat diary of 2/6. *Or-*

⁸ Conform the report by *Oberst* von Schönebeck, dated 17.11.1943 (for full text, see on-line annex).

⁹ Today known as Skopje, capital of Republic of Macedonia, or FYROM (the name recently changed to Republic of North Macedonia).



This colour photo is a small mystery. It clearly depicts a yellow-tail D.520, wearing Luftwaffe markings, buzzing low over Ferihegy airfield, Hungary (notice the two FIAT CR.42 fighters and an Arado Ar 96 trainer, at right). As there is no trace of this aircraft type being in service with the Royal Hungarian Air Force, one plausible explanation could be that the fighter was photographed en-route to Bulgaria.

lyak lists for 6 December 1943 (its first page consulted by the author) only 18 aircraft and 20 pilots ready for combat. It stayed the same in the next few days. Many others, undoubtedly, were still in the midst of training; four died in accidents.

As soon as more Dewoitines arrived, the next fighter group to receive the fighter type was the newly established 4/6. *Iztrebitelen Orlyak* (initially made up only by a single *yato*, the 712nd, along with 4. *orl. rota*), based at Karlovo. Finally, a third fighter group, the 1/6. *Orlyak* (initially two of its *yato*, the 622nd and the 632nd, along with 1. *orl. rota*), was re-equipped by early January 1944. The group received both newly delivered 'Devoatin' fighters, as well as those handed over by two squadrons (the 642nd and the 652nd) of the 2/6. *Orlyak*, which gradually converted to the Bf 109G. For now, the third squadron of the 2nd group (662nd) kept the D.520s. The 1/6. *Orlyak* (C/O *Kapitan* Marin G. Petrov), previously flying old Avia B.534 biplanes, relocated to Karlovo for conversion to the French fighter type. Once the conversion course was finished, the group moved to Asën airfield (located 15 km west of Kazanlāk air base), from where they initially performed combat operations. Later, it returned to Karlovo (Marno Pole) main base.

In mid-June 1944, 4/6. *Orlyak* was disbanded, its surviving D.520s and pilots being assigned to the 1/6. *Orlyak*, based at Karlovo. At this point, all combat-ready Dewoitines were assembled on this central air base. The number of available D.520s was reduced by the devastating bombing raids against Karlovo airfield, performed first by RAF night bombers on 12 June, then by USAAF daylight bombers on 28 June 1944. The destruction of Bulgaria's largest air base greatly reduced Bulgaria's potential fighter defence. To avoid another blow, the units based on Karlovo were dispersed to various secondary airfields. The 1/6. went to Asën landing ground (where the fighter school, also operating a few Dewoitines, was active), the 2/6. fled to a field near Banya village, located 10 km south of Karlovo, while the 3/6. stayed on Bozhurishte main air base, near Sofia, to cover the capital. In July, all D.520s assigned to combat duty were concentrated in one *orlyak*, the 1/6., led by *Kpt.* Rusi I. Rusev. On 1 August 1944, this *orlyak*, based at Asën, reported a total of 62 D.520 (a surplus of 22 aircraft to the standard equipment of 40 aircraft/squadron). Of them, only 36 D.520s were serviceable, however. This number sharply decreased to 32 aircraft (only half of them serviceable)¹⁰ by the time of Bulgaria's about-face of 9 September 1944. On New Year's Eve of 1945, 1/6. *Orlyak* reported only a dozen combat ready D.520s, plus 15 unserviceable ones, totalling 27 aircraft. The rest of the still extant Dewoitines were relegated to school duty.

First Flights, First Accidents

Not long after the D.520s entered active service in September 1943, the first accidents happened. The first recorded incident involving a Dewoitine was a fatal one, claiming the life of *Podporuchik* Petăr M. Hristov, who died in unspecified circumstances at Karlovo airfield, on 21 September. Next day, *Ppor.* Viktor D. Atanasov crashed in a D.520, on only his second flight on this aircraft type. Based on his logbook, he took off with No. 844 from Karlovo, at 8:10, for a training flight. However, the routine sortie ended in a "catastrophe" (as noted in his logbook) only 10 minutes later. The pilot escaped alive, but aircraft No. 844 is not mentioned any more in the logbook.

The following accident did not claim the pilot's life; however, the aircraft was 80% damaged, thus written off. Soon after take-off the engine quit, forcing the pilot, *Poruchik* Ivan P. Vătov of 642. *Yato*, to crash land aircraft No. 836 (NU+BR, no NN was allocated yet, but would be NN 72/7077), with retract-

¹⁰ Indeed, 27 D.520s were officially written off on 1 August alone (Nos. 3, 8, 11, 14, 15, 16, 19, 21, 29, 31, 36, 39, 42, 45, 46, 49, 50, 55, 67, 68, 77, 83, 89, 90, 92, 93, 100).

ed undercarriage at Domlyan, just south-east of Karlovo air base, on 4 October. In the accident report it was mentioned that the aircraft was manufactured in 1942.

Just eight days later, another D.520, No. 829 (NU+BQ, this time with NN 67/7077), was damaged. The pilot, *Podofitser* Simeon V. Penchev of 652. *Yato*, 2/6. *Orlyak*, could not use the brakes after landing on Karlovo due to a faulty compressed air tank and crashed. The damage assessment of the aircraft was 60%, thus repairable in specialised workshop. Interestingly, the accident report mentioned that the aircraft was manufactured in 1943, thus brand new! However, the shock of the day was the loss of another would-be Dewoitine pilot, *Podporuchik* Metodi K. Serginov, who perished during a training flight in unknown circumstances at Karlovo air base. On the 13th, it was the turn of *Poruchik* Zemen T. Dimitrov of 642. *Yato* to smash the port undercarriage of his mount, No. 807 (NT+QE, 52/7077), while taxiing on Karlovo. The sustained damage was estimated at only 10%, so the aircraft could be repaired quickly.

On 21 October, another Bulgarian Dewoitine pilot lost his life during training. Reportedly, the aircraft flown by *Podof.* Marin I. Dzhudzhev of 652. *Yato*, No. 819 (60/7077), produced in 1942 (as was the Hispano-Suiza 12Y engine), fell into a spin and crashed to the ground at Kurtovo, near Karlovo base. On 2 November, it was the turn of *Poruchik* Ivan P. Vătov of 662. *Yato* – who escaped alive from a serious incident less than a month earlier – to die while flying a D.520. Based on the post-accident report, while flying in a ‘four-finger’ formation (*krilo*) at 1,200 m, his aircraft, No. 840 (74/7077), suddenly lost critical speed (being the inner aircraft during a sharp turn at low altitude), fell into deadly spin and penetrated the ground near Karlovo, exploding into pieces. The catastrophe was witnessed by one of the German instructors flying in formation with Vătov, Herbert Matuschke, who signed the post-accident report as ‘*Einflieger und lic. Nachflieger des RLM*’.

Ten days later, yet another D.520 (No. 841, NU+BV, 75/7077) crashed. This time, the pilot escaped alive and the aircraft was recoverable. While returning from a training sortie performed together with his colleague *Feldfebel* Atanas I. Petrov, the engine quit in mid-flight, compelling the pilot, *Por.* Konstantin Todorov Konstantinov¹¹, *krilo* leader, acting commander of 662. *Yato*, to make a hard landing at Beguntsi (located about 10 km south-east of Karlovo). Vapour escaping from a faulty cooling radiator pipe obliterated his view, and he crash landed into a tree, losing the starboard wing in the process. The D.520 was eventually repaired, as it is listed as extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945.

The loss of four pilots and five aircraft, with several others damaged, in less than two months was certainly a shock to Bulgarian airmen. The much-expected French fighter type turned out not to be very docile and reliable after all. According to French sources, a seasoned test pilot of S.N.C.A.S.-E. was invited to Bulgaria to restore morale. He performed demonstration flights at Karlovo, in front of local pilots, demonstrating how easy is to fly the D.520 and how manoeuvrable the type is.

Superb side view of TI+RU, photographed after arrival at Karlovo, in September 1944. Notice the absence of ventral antenna mast, which was typical to Bulgarian Dewoitines. The French radio set type RI 537 could be used with only one antenna (no duplex mode, but either receiver, or transmitter, in alternative mode). In either case, the belly mounted mast was not required, only the fuselage spine mounted one. The OPL RX 39 reflector gunsight is visible right behind the windshield. At right, another D.520, with monocolour spinner, most probably yellow, can be seen. Notice the white segments around the black cross on the underwing surface are missing.

11 *Junker* Konstantin T. Konstantinov attended Polish piloting school at Rumia airfield, located 10 km NW of the port city of Gdynia, in mid-1939. He and his colleagues had to leave Poland on 6 September 1939, due to the war events. Upon return, he was assigned to the 1. Air Regiment. In August 1940, he was posted to the so-called ‘*Obraztsov Orlyak*’ (literally, Model, or Exemplary Group) as *Podporuchik*. Three years later, he graduated from the local Fighter School as *Poruchik*, and was assigned to 662. *Yato*, 2/6. *Orlyak*, where he transitioned to the Dewoitine D.520 fighter. He ended the war flying on the same type, without any air victory point.





Another view of Tl+RU, seen at Karlovo air base shortly after its arrival. The 3/4 yellow (RLM 27) and 1/4 white (RLM 67) spinner is visible. The Chauvière type propeller's blades were bare metal, with the sun-like company logo sticker glued onto them. Third from right is Podporuchik Nikola Nachev of 2/6. Orlyak, whose photo album served as source of this photograph, while at his left, also in shorts, is Ppor. Viktor Atanasov.

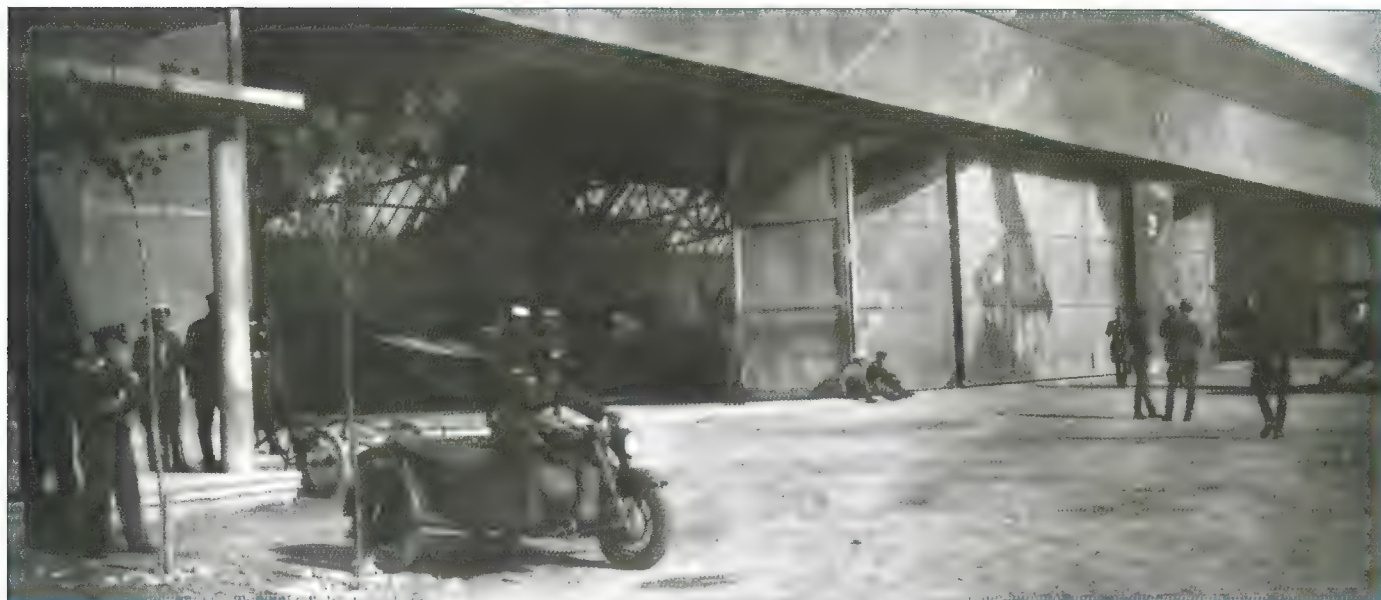
The series of losses continued in December as well. On the third day of the month, *Podofitser* Georgi N. Atanasov of 662. *Yato* had to belly land about 1 km west of Sofia airfield due to fuel starvation. The almost brand-new aircraft (it logged only 14 flying hours at the time of the accident), W.Nr. 853, NN 87/7077, Red 15, skid 110 meters on its belly before it stopped. The pilot was unharmed, and the aircraft could be repaired. Next day, during a training incident, aircraft No. 89 (c/n 856), Yellow 2, ended up on its back, as its pilot, *Poruchik* Toma H. Boev of the staff flight of 2/6. *Orlyak*, landed too fast on Karlovo and engaged the brakes too harshly. The pilot resumed flying the next day; however; unbeknown to him, he had only 37 more days to live.

Combatting the Enemy

The first time the D.520s took off when the air alarm sounded was on 14 November 1943. Four Dewoitines scrambled and patrolled over Karlovo base; however, since the enemy targeted Sofia, about 120 km west of Karlovo, the D.520s did not meet them and landed after one hour of flight. It was a clear failure of the fighter command centre, incapable of leading all home defence fighters to intercept the intruders.

The first time the D.520 scrambled to actually attempt to combat the US warplanes happened on 24 November 1943. Two *krila* (pl. for *krilo*, or flight) of the 2/6. *Orlyak*, led by its Commanding Officer *Kpt.* Nikolay Boshnakov¹², took off from Karlovo and headed to Sofia. However, due to late warning and the considerable distance to the Bulgarian capital – the target of the US bombers – they could not intercept the enemy this time either. This was the reason why the next day one of the squadrons, 662. *Yato*, moved from Karlovo to Vrazhdebna airfield, located in the vicinity of Sofia with its entire complement, 8 D.520s. Once there, it was temporarily subordinated to 3/6. *Orlyak*, as the first combat-ready Dewoitine squadron.

12 Former Maj. Nikolay S. Boshnakov – in 1946, expelled from the air force for 'subversive anti-state activity' and harassed by the Communist authorities, held in custody for six months, then imprisoned for another three months on unsubstantiated charges – was killed by Bulgarian border guards during a botched defection attempt through the Bulgarian-Turkish border on the night of 16th to 17th of August 1948. Along Boshnakov, two other airmen, former Cpt. Rusi I. Rusev and former Lt. Yordan G. Yordanov, were also killed. The location of their burial place is unknown even today. On 12 October 2016, a monument was erected to their memory near the village of Georgi Dobrev, not far from the location where they were gunned down then presumably buried in secret.



The next real alarm sounded as enemy airplane formations were spotted entering Bulgarian airspace on 10 December 1943¹³. That day, a total of 24 Dewoitine D.520s of all three squadrons took off: 16 D.520s of the staff, 642. and 652. *Yato* from Karlovo, while 8 D.520s of 662. *Yato* from Skopie (based on the group's diary; in fact, it was already Vrazhdebna). The two dozen Dewoitines scrambled at 12:15. Two D.520s of 662. *Yato* had to return to base due to technical issues. A third one could not retract its undercarriage. Nevertheless, the pilot decided to stay with the formation as much as the lower speed due to increased drag allowed. The Vrazhdebna-based squadron arrived first in the proximity of the enemy. However, they attacked the US warplanes in a disorganised manner, and could not score any fatal hits. The latecomers from Karlovo reportedly engaged the enemy bombers head-on. *Poruchik* Asen Kovachev, commanding officer of the 662. *Yato*, attacked a B-24 'Liberator' between Sofia and Vrazhdebna and scored several hits with 'good effect' (2 victory points). The attack was witnessed by *Podporuchik* Anton Barev, who later confirmed the claim. According to the *orlyak's* combat logbook, *Kpt.* Pavel Pavlov had probably downed a 'Fortress'¹⁴ (no points awarded) before he was shot down and killed. No US bomber was actually lost in the mission. The clash with P-38 'Lightnings', an air-to-air combat between fighters – also a première for the Bulgarian D.520 – remained inconclusive, as the 'Lightning' pilots kept a protective umbrella over the 'Liberators' and did not give prolonged chase to enemy fighters, as they had on the 24th November mission to Sofia. It was only *Poruchik* Viktor Pavlov, commanding officer of the 642. *Yato*, who claimed that he scored hits on one of the twin-boom US fighters, but received no points for this. US airmen reported "about twenty German and Italian single-seat fighters [the latter probably mistaken for the French Dewoitine D.520 type. D.B.] attacked over the target (...)".

After the last aircraft landed, the Bulgarians counted their losses. The commanding officer of the 652. *Yato*, the 32-year-old *Kpt.* Pavel L. Pavlov¹⁵, did not return from combat. He was killed in action, being the first victim among D.520 pilots due to enemy action. It was reported that while attempting to attack a B-24 'Liberator' head on, the mount of *Kpt.* Pavlov was hit by the bomber's on-board gunners. Not having an armoured windscreen – a great drawback of the French fighter – the Bulgarian squadron commander was hit and lost control of his aircraft, No. 59/7077, which crashed at the village of Odranitsa, near Sofia. Another – more plausible – version of his demise is that he was jumped upon by the

The hangars at Marno Pole, also known as Karlovo air base, packed with recently arrived D.520 fighters, in September 1943. The aircraft closest to the hangar door reveals the first two letters of its radio code, namely NU. Two Luftwaffe non-commissioned officers (NCOs) are standing at left, killing time.

13 A more detailed description of the US attack formation, as well as the intended scope and effect of the bombing raid is given in the Bf 109G chapter (same applies to all subsequent USAAF combat missions).

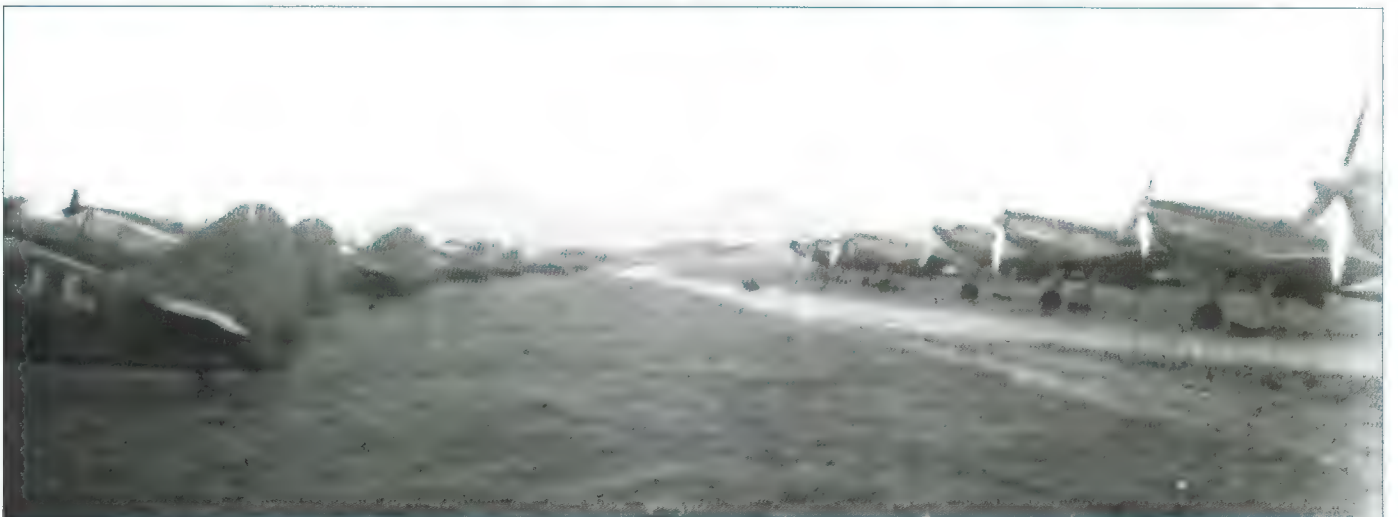
14 Most Bulgarian fighter pilots invariably labelled all US four-engine bombers as 'Fortress'.

15 Pavel L. Pavlov was born on 25 December 1911 in the village of Trăstenik, near Pleven, in a well-off family. His sibling, Avksenti, became a lawyer. Pavel enrolled in the Air Force in 1936, being assigned the rank of *Podporuchik* (2nd Lt.). Three years later, he was sent to Poland for specialisation training, to learn the Polish flying system. In September, the unexpected attack of Poland by Hitler's Germany, then Stalin's USSR caught him in eastern Poland. Pavel Pavlov was captured by Soviet troops in the area of Lublin, and taken captive. Thanks to the intervention of the Bulgarian Ministry of War, he could eventually return home after staying in Moscow for a while. In 1941, he joined the élite 6th Fighter Regiment with the rank of *Kapitan* (Cpt.). On 10 December 1943, Pavlov led his squadron to intercept the US bombers. It was to be his last flight. His charred remains found on the crash site were interred in Sofia three days later. Posthumously, Pavlov was raised to the rank of Major. He was awarded with the Order „За военна заслуга” ('For Military Merit') and posthumously with the Order „За храброст” ('For Bravery'). After the collapse of Communism, Pavlov was elevated to the rank of Colonel by Ministry of Defence Order No. 420/19.10.1992.



Todor 'Tedi' Vălkov – son of the Commander-in-Chief of the 6th Iztrebitelen Polk (Fighter Regiment), Polkovnik (Colonel) Vasil P. Vălkov – used his privileged status to make a series of photographs of the freshly arrived Dewoitine fighters, parked on Marno-Pole (Karlovo) air base, in September 1943. The enclosed six photos are the best ones from this series of shots, taken with his simple, fixed-focus box camera. The side view and the tail close-up photo most probably show TI+RU, also featured on a couple of photos seen on previous pages.







This row of recently delivered D.520s was also taken at their destination airfield: Marno-Pole (Karlovo). The second aircraft is most probably NŮ+BQ (c/n 829).

This particular aircraft was damaged soon after its arrival by Podofitser Simeon V. Penchev of 652. Yato,

who could not use the brakes after landing on Karlovo due to faulty compressed air bottle. The aircraft was then repaired and, identified as 67/7077, performed several combat sorties against

USAAF warplanes until it was written off officially on 1 August 1944.

P-38 flown by 1st Lieutenant Jack Walker of the 97th Fighter Squadron and downed. Indeed, upon his return to Lecce, Walker filed a victory claim for the destruction of a 'Focke-Wulf FW-190' (thus something *else* than a familiar 'Me-109') over Sofia. Pavlov was replaced in command by *Poruchik* Nedělcho Bonchev.

Based on the fighter group's combat diary¹⁶, the aircraft of *Podporuchik* Anton Barev returned to the base with 17 holes in the airframe. *Podofitser* Simeon Penchev counted 'only' two holes. Other D.520s, too, were slightly damaged, mostly by P-38 'Lightnings', which were credited with a total of nine (!) confirmed air victories, one probable and four damaged (all, except for a 'FW-190', being identified as 'Me-109', shot down over Sofia at 12:20) – a case of severe overclaim (9:1 ratio).

The combat début of the Dewoitine D.520s was less than exemplary. In addition to the loss of *Kapitan* Pavlov, none of the Dewoitine pilots were able to inflict fatal damage to the bombers, the primary target of an interceptor fighter. No enemy fighter was downed, either. While the D.520 may have been more than qualified as a frontline fighter for the French *Armée de l'Air* in mid-1940, this was late 1943, and quite a few improvements in fighter designs had taken place since. The Dewoitine D.520 had become obsolescent by the end of 1943, and was unable to satisfactorily fill the task of modern interceptor fighter.

After the first 'live' combat mission of the Dewoitine-equipped squadrons – which was judged by both the Bulgarian and German Air Force Commands as unsatisfactory – lessons were drawn and changes introduced. Better coordination was implemented, high altitude group exercises were performed (up to 7,000-8,000 m, the usual altitude USAAF warplanes flew at). As described earlier, the two Karlovo based squadrons were ordered to move to Vrazhdebna airfield, in the proximity of Sofia, where they joined the third one posted there a couple of weeks earlier.

All these measures were put to 'live' test only ten days after the first combat. On 20 December, the 15th USAAF returned to Bulgarian skies in greater numbers. This time, the fighter escort (48 P-38s) surpassed the number of bombers (37 B-24s), probably due to lessons learned in earlier missions. Weather was favourable over Bulgaria, and the warning of enemy aircraft formations, spotted coming from south-west in two waves, reached Bulgarian fighter units in time. Accordingly, the 24 serviceable D.520s of 2/6. *Orlyak* could take off from Vrazhdebna quickly, at 12:30. The pilots had enough time to climb up to 7,000 m, the altitude the enemy formation was expected to be flying at. The upcoming attack on the raiders was in line with the tactics developed, taught and trained in the past few days. While the Bf 109Gs of 3/6. *Orlyak* confronted the US fighter escort, the D.520s of 2/6. *Orlyak* attacked the bombers. After the firing pass, they engaged the P-38s coming to the defence of the B-24. Several *mêlées* formed, each side trying to get the other one with various tactics and techniques, without great effect, however.

652nd Yato pilot *Podporuchik* Stefan Marinopolski, credited with a destroyed a four-engine bomber following a head-on attack, while flying on aircraft No. 825 in a 95-minute combat sortie, recalled the events: "Flying at about 4,600 to 5,500 m, I made one pass from the front [of the bomber formation, i.e., frontal attack]. I was not aiming at one particular airplane, but at all of them. I strafed the entire group from the front to the rear, and just saw the explosion of one airplane [probably the one rammed by Spisarevski D.B.]." A fellow Dewoitine pilot would later confirm that he witnessed the B-24 attacked by *Podporuchik*

16 The combat diary of 2/6. *Orlyak* preserved at the DVIA Archive in Veliko Târnovo and consulted by the Author in 2004 lists only the main events of the fighter group's activity between 6 December 1943 and 27 July 1944, thus the Author believes it's only a 'sanitised version', compiled and typed post-war.

Marinopolski crash shortly after his attack. Another B-24 was claimed as being damaged by Marinopolski's squadron mate, *Poruchik* Nedelcho Bonchev (2 points). While difficulties had been encountered in penetrating the fighter screen laid by P-38s, the D.520 pilots ended up in several wild mêlées with the escorting twin-boom fighters. These clashes resulted in three Bulgarian pilots being credited with the destruction of a P-38 each. Overall, the Dewoitine D.520s had performed remarkably better than during their combat début ten days previously.

After all was over, the Dewoitines landed at 13:45 without any combat loss. In turn, a series of claims were filed, as follows: *Poruchik* Viktor Pavlov for one P-38 at Dolni Pasarel (confirmed, 1 point), *Poruchik* Nedelcho Bonchev one B-24 between Kyustendil and Bosilegrad, which reportedly started to burn (2 points), *Podporuchik* Stefan Marinopolski claimed one B-24 as shot down and crashed at Bosilegrad (confirmed, 3 points), while *Podporuchik* Nikola Nachev and *Podofitser* Georgi Atanasov claimed one enemy fighter each, at Vitosha and between Dupnitsa and Radomir (both confirmed, 1-1 points). Two more claims, filed by *Poruchik* Bogdan Iliev and *Poruchik* Asen Kovachev – for a B-24 and a P-38, respectively – remained unconfirmed (0 point).

However, despite the Bulgarians' overall claims, only one B-24 of the 376th BG was actually lost over Bulgaria, the one Bf 109G-pilot *Poruchik* Dimitar Spisarevski collided with (in stark contrast to three confirmed and six damaged four-engine bombers officially attributed to the Bulgarian fighter pilots – those flying on Bf 109Gs included). Three P-38s of the 82nd FG failed to return to their base in Italy (Bulgarian fighter pilots, Bf 109G ones included, were credited with a total of seven enemy fighters). Despite the substantial overclaims, the Bulgarian Dewoitine pilots' morale got a much needed boost. The fear of engaging the dreaded enemy greatly diminished, their vulnerability demonstrated.

It's interesting to mention how American airmen saw this combat mission. Upon returning to their base, they claimed that about 30 enemy fighters attacked the bombers over the target, some dropping 'aerial bombs' (sic!) – probably drop tanks. Bomber crews also reported small silver discs (referred to as 'foo fighters') seen during the mission. The Liberators' on-board gunners claimed six enemy fighters downed and three more probable¹⁷. The 'Lightning' pilots were credited with two 'Me-109's and a 'FW-190', along with four more 'Me-109's damaged, all over Sofia, at 12:50. Apparently, the US fighter pilots overclaimed as well; however, to a much lesser extent this time, less than the Bulgarians.

A well-documented incident involved D.520, NN 61/7077 (c/n 822), No. 4 [listed in the records as either No. 4, or No. 61 – in fact 'Green 4', see colour profile on page 227). After returning from prolonged combat low on fuel, the pilot, *Ppor.* Hristo I. Petrov of 652. *Yato*, had to perform an unscheduled landing on Sofia airfield. While rolling on unfamiliar terrain, he pressed the brakes too harshly and his mount ended up on its nose, in the so-called 'pilot's monument' position. The almost new aircraft, flown only for 15 hours, was repaired in a matter of days, and returned to duty, as was its careless pilot.

This is how the D.520 pilots ended up the year of 1943, and prepared for the next year to come. Unbeknown to them, 1944 would be way bloodier and more ferocious than they had ever expected.

Bloody 1944

The New Year's first clash with American warplanes happened on the 4th. That day, the 81 'Flying Fortresses' sent to bomb Sofia found the target overcast; therefore, they dropped their payload on secondary targets. The bomber crews reported more than ten enemy fighters attacking the formations. They were not the 15 D.520s of the recently converted 1/6. *Orlyak*, led by *Kapitan* Rusi Rusev, which took off to engage the enemy. They came back empty handed, as they could not locate the enemy formation. Nevertheless, in the end, the 'baptism of fire' for this fighter group turned out to be successful. Reportedly, *Podporuchik* Dimitar A. Bächvarov, the 1/6. *Orlyak* officer on duty on the airfield, took off alone, on his own initiative, to confront the enemy¹⁸. It turned out that he was the only Bulgarian fighter pilot to make contact with the US bomber formation, about 60-70 four-engine bombers, over Kyustendil. He reportedly downed one of them

The 'rider' (identified as Poruchik Emil Stoitsev) sits atop of his sleek French bird. The last two letters of the Stkz. of the D.520 in the background appears to be QZ (the first two letters might have been NT, based on the similar NT+QE radio code). This might very well be the same aircraft depicted on page 182, bottom.



17 This data shows what is well known among historians studying air warfare – namely that US bomber crews greatly exaggerated their air victory claims. This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that more on-board gunners shot at the same target, which was then seen diving, usually 'trailing smoke'.

18 Some sources give the date of this episode as 10 January.

Another freshly arrived D.520, captured by the camera on Karlovo airfield. The engine cowling underside and the spinner appear to be painted in yellow, as undoubtedly the tail surface was too.



Bulgarian airmen of 2/6. Orlyak and a civilian pose with a freshly delivered D.520 in the autumn of 1943. The pilot on the left is Podporuchik Anton Barev, while the moustachioed man next to him is technical officer Karakonovski. The pilot sitting on the wing is Poruchik Emil 'Bubi' Stoitsev. The civilian person at right is a Frenchman.

following two consecutive attacks. The target lost altitude and was reported as crashed near to the town of Bitolya (Macedonia). The daring solitary pilot received 3 victory points for his feat¹⁹. By contrast, no American bomber is listed as lost over Bulgaria that day (however, Bulgarian ground forces located a wreck at Bitolya, on 4 January). USAAF fighter pilots filed only one claim against an enemy fighter, a 'Me-109', damaged over Sofia.

On the 9th, much-anticipated German reinforcements arrived in Bulgaria, more precisely to Vrazhdebna air base, located east of Sofia. It was a weak *Luftwaffe* fighter group (I./JG 5) that showed up, arriving from the neighbouring Rumania. The reinforcement pretty much doubled the number of fighters available for the defence of Bulgaria. The *Luftwaffe* unit was primarily tasked with assisting the Bulgarians with additional firepower in defending their capital in case of an USAAF attack. In addition, the German pilots would also give a hand to their less experienced Bulgarian comrade-in-arms with training. Indeed, the first impression of the German pilots were: "the Bulgarian officers were all older than us and inexperienced. They still flew the already outdated French Dewoitine D.520 machines that were absolutely unsuitable against Americans [flying] P-38s, P-47s, P-51s and B-17s."



The next time USAAF warplanes were sent over Bulgaria in great numbers was on 10 January, the day after the German reinforcements' arrival. The defenders reacted in force. This time, several clashes occurred, with deadly results. That day, the crewmembers of the 142 'Flying Fortresses' and the 38 escort 'Lightnings' making up the main formation reported up to sixty enemy fighters²⁰, which attacked them continuously for forty minutes (this time, as a première, *Luftwaffe* '109' pilots also took off to defend Sofia along with their Bulgarian comrades-in-arms).

Alerted in time, 27 D.520s of the 1/6. and 2/6. *Orlyatsi* took off, followed by 16 Bf 109Gs of 3/6. *Orlyak* and a bit later the I./JG 5, with about 24 fighter machines. The 'rookie' 4/6. *Orlyak*, in transition to the D.520, eventually joined the fray as well with four machines. First to take off was the *chetvorka* of 1/6. *Orlyak*, from Karlovo main air base, at 11:23. They were followed by the identically equipped 2/6. *Orlyak* with 23 fighters, taking off from Sofia (Vrazhdebna) air base,

19 Note of the Author: it's interesting how a lone flying pilot could be officially awarded with a confirmed victory, as there were no witnesses to the 'kill'. However, the wreck found by Bulgarian soldiers at Bitolya may have served as sufficient proof.

20 A second, smaller US bomber formation, targeting Skopie, did not report any aerial opposition.



at 11:40. The D.520s were ordered to gather above Sofia-Slivnitsa, at 8,000m, in anticipation of the enemy. Despite the weather being cloudy, the Americans showed up in force. This time, the Bulgarians and their German comrades-in-arms were waiting for them in time, prepared and in significant numbers.

The Dewoitines engaged the intruders head on, so as not to lose time with manoeuvres. After the first firing pass, they approached the bombers from all angles, attacking them in pairs, or individually. The bold attack yielded a large number of claims filed by D.520s pilots, as follows: *Poruchik* Zemen Dimitrov hit the vital parts of a B-17 'Flying Fortress', which started to burn and crashed at Vitosha (3 points). *Podporuchik* Georgi Gochev was confirmed with shooting down another bomber after two passes, which crashed near Golo Bărdo (3 points). *Podporuchitsi* Emil Bălgaranov²¹ and Ivan Ivanov were credited with the destruction of one 'Fortress' each, both seen crashing at Lyulin (3 points each), while *Podporuchitsi* Vladimir Aleksandrov and Emil Stoitsev²² damaged an enemy bomber each with good result (2 points each). *Ppor.* Stoitsev was also mentioned as attacking an enemy fighter with effect (0 point), while the second claim for a B-17, filed by *Ppor.* Aleksandrov, was turned down by VNVV officials (0 point). Five further claims submitted by 2/6. *Orlyak* pilots for four P-38s and a sole B-17 were also annulled.

1/6. *Orlyak*, freshly trained on Dewoitine fighters, also joined the fracas. When battle died down, a *dvoika* (pair), made by *Poruchik* Vasil Shishkov and *Kandidat ofitser* Stefan Iliev, returned home claiming a four-engine 'Stărling' bomber (reference to the British Short Stirling bomber, misidentification of a B-17), between Kladnitsa and Radomir. Eventually, the officer was credited with two points, while the NCO wingman with one point.

When the tally was added, the total was a record number of five four-engine bombers shot down confirmed, along with two others seriously damaged, as well as five fighters and two bombers 'shot at' by D.520s. All these added up to a record 19 victory points. Clearly, 10 January was the finest day of the Dewoitine pilots during the entire war, as far as the victory claims concern. Reality, however, was totally different. Only two B-17Fs were officially lost to enemy fighters, along with a P-38G (another, presumably combat damaged *Lightning* of the same 14th FG crashed during landing on the home airfield in Italy). A further B-17 was damaged, with one crewmember dead. A P-47D 'Thunderbolt' of the 325th Fighter Group was also reported missing, most probably not due to enemy fighters (it crashed into the south Adriatic Sea, after the engine had quit). If we add the confirmed victories awarded to the Bf 109G-flying 3/6. *Orlyak*, three P-38s, we end up with five bombers and three fighters. This was the case of a three-fold overclaim by Bulgarian fighter pilots – not counting the German Bf 109G pilots' claims²³. If those were counted, the Axis overclaim ratio would be even higher.

The list of claims filed by US fighter pilots was also quite long. Five 'Me-109s' and four 'FW-190s' were claimed as destroyed, three 'Me-109s' and two 'FW-190s' were reported as damaged, while three additional 'Me-109s' were claimed as probable. All these victory claims were located 3-4 miles north-west of Sofia, achieved at precisely 12:30. One 'FW-190' claimed as destroyed was eventually downgraded to

One by one, concomitant with replacing the Luftwaffe markings and codes with Bulgarian ones, the Dewoitines were, some partially, some completely, repainted largely following the Luftwaffe style. Notice the pristine overall look and the absence of any black exhaust smoke trail left on the fuselage side, in contrast to the 'dirty' appearance of the aircraft which arrived from France. Of particular interest is the irregular light grey area painted on the front fin root – which the Author believes identifies an aircraft repainted in Bulgaria – as well as the yellow lower wingtip and the removed panel of the engine cowlings underside, seen near the starboard main undercarriage, also yellow. The spinner also received a new coat of paint, possibly red, matching the ID colour of 662. Yato. The aircraft's individual coloured identification number was not applied yet after the fuselage marking. Notice the much darker looking colour applied on the inner area of the upper wing surface, visible on the wing leading edge – not visible anywhere on the fuselage – which might have been 'Bulgarian' dark green.

21 *Poruchik* Emil P. Bălgaranov died in a flying accident, together with his squadron mate, *Feldfebel* Georgi N. Atanasov, while flying a captured ex-Italian Nardi FN.315 *Kiwi*, which crashed at Varna, on 3 June 1944.

22 Occasionally, his family name is spelled Stoytsev.

23 It has to be noted that a *Luftwaffe* fighter group (I./JG 5) also scrambled that day to intercept the Americans. Their activity, including victories, as well as losses, is detailed in the Bf 109G chapter.



Two stills depicting freshly painted D.520s, proudly showing their new Bulgarian marking, are lined up for a review on Marno-Pole (Karlovo) air base, in late 1943. The aircraft in the foreground appears to be Red or Green 7 (outlined), while the one in the background does not have the VNVV marking applied on the fuselage side yet, only on the wings.



'probable' only. This total does not include the grossly overinflated claims filed by on-board gunners: 30 (!) destroyed enemy fighters and 14 probable ones. The Germans lost 3 Bf 109Gs destroyed and 8 more damaged in combat. Two others are listed as bellied due to technical reasons. Known Bulgarian combat losses were one D.520 and one Bf 109G damaged in combat. The US fighter pilots' overclaim ratio was 3:1, if only irretrievable losses vs. confirmed victories are counted²⁴. However, if we add up *all* claims vs. *all* losses, the Americans' overall number of claim matches *exactly* the losses of the Axis (17 aircraft), not counting the on-board gunners' over-inflated claims, of course.

The 2/6. *Orlyak* reported two lost D.520s and one dead pilot: *Poruchik* Toma H. Boev, who was killed while taking off from Telish airfield. His aircraft was low on fuel after prolonged combat, that is why he had to perform an emergency landing on the nearest airfield. Upon being refuelled, he hurried to take

²⁴ As is the case with other loss vs. victories calculations, the claims submitted by the anti-aircraft artillery are not considered.



Except for the long nose, the pilot's view forward and sideways was quite good, since he was seated rather high over the fuselage and the aft-sliding canopy had large, clear panels. The cockpit cabin of the Dewoitine D.520 was spacious, but lacked armour protection. This shortcoming led to several losses against USAAF fighters. Ground fire in the anti-German campaign also inflicted serious losses to D.520s strafing at low level. Photo taken in late 1944, during the anti-German campaign in Macedonia.

off as quickly as possible. While taxiing on the snowy runway, Boev pulled the stick too quickly and too hard right after difficult take-off. The aircraft stalled, fell back to the ground, killing him instantly. The other D.520 was shot down by enemy fighters, but its pilot, *Podporuchik* Nikola N. Nachev, survived the force landing with his crippled aircraft (possibly 'Green 13', depicted in a pair of photos, see page 199).

The third fighter group that started to re-equip with the D.520, 4/6. *Orlyak*, also joined the battle. Because of the strong show of force by the enemy, the group commander ordered four junior pilots to take off. Accordingly, a *chetvorka* (4-aircraft flight), led by *Podporuchik* Todor N. Rozev²⁵, soon got airborne. The young and inexperienced pilots (*Feldfebel* Simeon K. Mihaylov, *Feldfebel* Ivan M. Somlev and *Podofitser* Kosyu 'Kircho' Stoyanov) climbed to 7,000 m combat altitude over Sofia. When they reached the capital, it was already in smoke and flames, and the enemy was not seen anywhere. Then they were directed towards the Pernik-Kyustendil area. While en-route to the target area, the Dewoitine flown by *Feldfebel*²⁶ Simeon K. Mihaylov²⁷, called 'Monkata' by his friends, suddenly tilted to the left, fell into a spin, and disappeared from sight. Based on the memories of Rozev, Mihaylov, who was sick of sinusitis, fell unconscious at high altitude and lost control of the aircraft, crashing to his death. He was the second D.520 pilot lost that day. The wreck of Mihaylov's D.520 was found near Malo Buchino, along with the pilot's lifeless body. The rest of the 'foursome' didn't catch the Americans. It's worth noting that, except for a D.520 damaged in combat, all other losses occurred without enemy interference: two dead men, two lost and one damaged aircraft!

An interesting side story to this eventful day is connected to another pilot of the same rookie *chetvorka* mentioned above: *Feldfebel* Ivan M. Somlev. Misidentifying a German Bf 110 twin-engine fighter for an American warplane (probably a twin-boom 'Lightning'), he engaged in hot pursuit of the 'enemy' until spending all his fuel, so had to belly land his powerless D.520 near Elena village. The chased Bf 110 reached safely Bucharest, with its crew having quite a 'friendly fire' story to tell. Somlev belly-landed with his aircraft hit by 'friendly' bullets, himself suffering minor injuries.

Accidents and incidents happened outside combat activity as well. On 11 January 1944, at 8 o'clock, 'Devootin' (as quoted in the original document) 64/7077, No. 825, of 652. *Yato*, piloted by *Podpor.* Krum

25 Todor Nikolov Rozev was born in Sofia, on 1 April 1920. He enrolled in the school of reserve officers in Kazanlák, in 1940. Top of the class in 1942. After graduation, he was posted to Bozhurishte airfield. In 1943, he was deployed to the fighter school in Dolna Mitropoliya (translated as 'Lower Archdiocese'). After completion of the fighter training, he was included in the composition of the newly established 4/6. *Orlyak*, in Karlovo. *Ppor.* Rozev performed his first combat sortie on 10 January 1944. Between 1943 and 1944, Rozev logged 30 combat sorties and participated in 14 air combats, being awarded with 3 victory points. After the end of the war, he continued his service in Bulgaria's air force. He transitioned to the Soviet Yak-9 fighter, then became an instructor. He was fired from the air force as Colonel, in 1956. Todor Rozev died on 7 October 1990.

26 Other source gives his rank as *Podofitser*, while another one as *Kandidat Podofitser*.

27 Simeon K. Mihaylov was born in Balchik, southern Dobrudzha, then part of Rumania, on 28 January 1921.

H. Atanasov, suffered a minor accident (15% damage) during take-off from Sofia airfield (most probably Vrazhdebna). It has to be noted that this particular aircraft was the regular mount of his squadron mate, *Podporuchik* Stefan Marinopolski, who flew it 18 times, of which five were combat sorties, including on the preceding day (for details of his flights, check out the on-line annex).

The next massive air raid targeting Bulgaria took place on 24 January. Due to cloudy weather over Sofia, the bombers dropped their payload on secondary targets. Thirty-nine B-17s targeted Vratsa, whose crews reported up to fifteen Bf 109Gs over the target. However, these must have been manned by *Luftwaffe* pilots, as the Bulgarian fighters – only 14 Dewoitines of the 1/6. *Orlyak* coming from Karlovo – missed the rendezvous with the enemy. Although the Americans lost a total of eight B-17s – six by the 2nd Bomber Group alone, of which five force-landed after exhausting their fuel stock due to poor command and leadership, making this one of the worst combat missions for the group – as well as a single B-24 and two P-38s; Bulgarian fighter pilots did not fill any air victory claim, only the Germans did.

US fighter pilots claimed that combat day a 'Me-109' and two 'FW-190s' destroyed in Sofia airspace (one of them over 'Sofia airdrome'), as well as two 'Me-109' damaged, along with a 'FW-190'. These claims were completed by a single 'FW-190' destroyed, which was later downgraded to probable. Additionally, bomber crews filed for a total of four destroyed and two probable enemy fighters. The Germans lost only a couple Bf 109G-6s reportedly to anti-aircraft fire (!) over 'Pustoscha'. There is no information available on Bulgarian losses, if any. Certainly, no Bulgarian fighter pilot was killed in action that day.

During the next two months, there was a lull in daylight bombing raids against Bulgaria. The VNVV used this respite to re-equip and reorganise its fighter *orlyatsi*. The Bf 109G-equipped 3/6. *Orlyak* – top fighter unit of the VNVV – and the mixed-equipment 2/6. *Orlyak* (mostly flying Bf 109Gs, completed by a limited number of D.520s) was complemented by the fully built-up 1/6. and 4/6. *Orlyatsi*, both equipped with the D.520.

Flying personnel rotation also took place. Of 2/6. *Orlyak*, five experienced pilots were ordered to another unit on 14 February, having been replaced by four new ones six days later, as follows:

Detached from the fighter group:

- *Podporuchik* Ivan Velchev [to 4/6. *Orlyak*]
- *Podporuchik* Lyuben Ivanov [to 4/6. *Orlyak*]
- *Podofitser* Yordan Daskalov [to 4/6. *Orlyak*]
- *Podofitser* Ivan Atanasov
- *Podofitser* Kosta Spasov

Attached to the fighter group:

- *Poruchik* Dimităr Popov [from 3/6. *Orlyak*]
- *Podporuchik* Kiril Andonov
- *Podporuchik* Asen Gigov
- *Podporuchik* Boris Vodenicharov

A *Luftwaffe* document gives the following order of battle for VNVV fighter units for 9 March 1944²⁸:

Bulgarische Fliegerverbände (Stand: 9.3.1944)

1. Fliegerdivision

6. Jagdregiment

I. Jagdgruppe mit 4 Jagdstaffeln, Devoitine (Karlovo)

II. Jagdgruppe mit 4 Jagdstaffeln, Bf 109G & Devoitine (Wraschdebna)

III. Jagdgruppe mit 4 Jagdstaffeln, Bf 109G (Bojurische)

IV. Jagdgruppe mit 4 Jagdstaffeln, Devoitine (Karlovo)

[Source: *Luftwaffenführungsstab Ic/Frd.Lw.Ost 26922/44 gch*]

A secret German telegram dated 8 April, sent by the chief of DLM *Bulgarien* to *Genst. Gen. Qu 6 Abt. Kurfürst*, sums up the existing Bulgarian D.520 air park, as follows: "Von 80 bei Bulg. Luft. vorhandenen Devoitine 520 doch 8 startklar. 72 Flugzeuge stehen wegen fehlender E-teile. E-teile bestellt und am Lager." ("Of the 80 existing Devoitine 520s of the Bulgarian air force, only 8 are serviceable. 72 aircraft are grounded due to lack of spare parts. Spare parts have been ordered and are in stock.")

During a combat drill held at Vrazhdebna airfield on 17 March, 2/6. *Orlyak* could send up 35 fighters: 19 Bf 109Gs and 16 D.520s. By the end of March, 4/6. *Orlyak* moved to Asen airfield, leaving only 1/6. *Orlyak* stationed at Karlovo main air base. At this point, the two Dewoitine-equipped fighter groups (1/6. and 4/6.) mustered a total of 28 serviceable D.520s.

On 29 and 30 March 1944, Sofia was subjected again to a combined night and day bombing raid by the Anglo-American strategic aviation. During the night, about 70 RAF bombers unloaded their pay-

²⁸ The four *Staffeln/yata*/squadrons per *Gruppe/orlyak*/group is believed to be erroneous information (in fact, only three squadrons were in a fighter group, plus the staff flight).



Feldfebel Atanas Matev poses in front of a D.520 freshly introduced in service with the 2/6. Orlyak. If the note on the rear side of the photo is accurate, this is the 100th, and last, D.520 to enter Bulgarian service. The rudder was white, while the engine cowlings' under surface and the propeller spinner probably bright red, albeit this was very soon replaced with another, less conspicuous colour, black with white spiral. The individual number on the rear fuselage appears to be green, outlined in white. Possible numerals are: 3, 6, 8, or 9.

load upon the capital, from 21:14 until 21:34, from 3,000 to 4,000 m altitude. Vrazhdebna air base was also hit by a dozen large calibre demolition bombs. Except for sporadic flak fire, no other defence measures took place²⁹.

Next morning – with the reorganisation of the VNVV fighter arm still incomplete – the American day bombers and their escorts returned in force. The raid happened earlier than usual, and was aimed to catch the defenders by surprise. The 30 March attack was the strongest Sofia had yet seen. The bomber force comprised 114 B-17s and 252 B-24s, while the fighter escort had 96 P-38s and 24 P-47s. To combat the intruders, the Bulgarian defenders scrambled a record number, thus far, of 80 fighters: 39 Bf 109Gs, 37 D.520s and 4 Avia B-135s, the latter flown by pilot instructors (see appropriate chapter). Of these, 20 Bf 109Gs were part of the VNVV's 'spearhead', 3/6. Orlyak, 19 Bf 109Gs and 6 D.520s belonged to the 2/6. Orlyak, while the two purely Dewoitine-equipped fighter groups (1/6.³⁰ and 4/6.) scrambled 28 and 3 serviceable D.520s,

29 Venerable pilot Asen Kovachev recalls that the night bombings prior to 30 March 1944 exposed the necessity of night fighter protection. Therefore, Col. Vălkov ordered the pilots from Kovachev's 662nd Yato to start night flight trainings, led by two German instructors. The Bulgarians listened to theory and even made one, or two night take-offs and landings, but never reached the stage of group flight. Moreover, right after 30 March, the two German NCO instructors were recalled to their combat units, thus training ceased.

30 Based on Asen Kovachev's memoirs, 1/6. Orlyak took off from Marno Pole with circa 30 D.520s they received from 'his' 2/6. Orlyak, after the latter fighter group's rearmament with Bf 109Gs.



respectively. It has to be noted that by the end of March 1944, the *Luftwaffe* fighter units had left the country and the immediate vicinity, as the situation in the *Reich* became desperate, prompting the recall of all 'dispensable' fighters stationed abroad. The closest *Luftwaffe* unit was stationed at Niš, but they did not take off, reportedly due to muddy terrain³¹. Therefore, the Bulgarian pilots were left alone in defending their homeland against the increasing number of American warplanes.

The bomber crewmembers reported about twenty 'Me-109s' and 'Fw-190s' attacking them aggressively, but the fighter escort managed to drive them off. US fighter pilots combated up to forty enemy fighters, including 'French-made Dewoitine 520s'.

Indeed, the six D.520s of 2/6. *Orlyak*, which took off from Vrazhdebna air base with a slight delay, at 09:25³², clashed with a number of 'Lightnings', and separated them from the heavy bombers they were supposed to escort. 662. *Yato* commanding officer, *Poruchik* Asen Kovachev³³, and his wingman, *Podporuchik* Vladimir Aleksandrov, scored hits on two P-38s, but could not down either of them (each received 0 point). Same for *Feldfebel* Atanas A. Matev³⁴ of the 642nd *Yato*, who was also logged with an attack against an enemy fighter nearby Dupnitsa, "which started to smoke", but received no credit for it (0 point). However, in private, Matev claimed the 'Lightning' as shot down, along with another one 'bagged' at an unspecified date. The *dvoyka* of *Podporuchik* Asen Gigov and *Podporuchik* Emil Stoitsev³⁵ also damaged a 'Fortress' (1 point each)³⁶. Based on his logbook, *Ppor.* Gigov flew aboard D.520, No. 11 (no colour mentioned).

Officially, the two D.520 pilots killed in action that day belonged to 2/6. *Orlyak*; however, strangely, neither of them is mentioned in the fighter group's combat diary, which laconically states "there were no combat losses". The fallen airmen were *Kapitan* Ivan V. Boyadzhiev³⁷ and *Feldfebel* Yordan N. Kubadinov. The former crashed at Zhabokrek, near Kocherinovo, while the latter near Alino, south of Sofia. Based on the recollections of *Kapitan* (ret.) Dimităr S. Lazarov, shared with the Author in his Sofia home on 22 May 2004, *Kapitan* Ivan Boyadzhiev, who having been separated from his unit, teamed with him for a while that fateful day, but was shot down by US bomber gunners [for the whole story, see the Bf 109E chapter]. The 27-year-old fighter pilot instructor had been promoted to Captain just the previous day. Another Dewoitine was lost in combat, the one piloted by *Poruchik* Ivan D. Kasiyanov. After his aircraft was set on fire, he bailed out over Dolna Koznitsa, near Kyustendil. Upon descending on his chute, he was reportedly shot at by an American fighter. Luckily, Kasiyanov survived the ordeal, although severely wounded in his leg in air, so he would never fly again.

The sister fighter group, 1/6., fared better, but not flawlessly. While the tight-knit formation climbed to the targeted 8,000 m combat altitude, two Dewoitines suddenly left formation at around 6,000 m and dived almost to ground level. It turned out that the oxygen system of the two aircraft was faulty and both pilots had lost consciousness due to lack of air. Both *Podporuchitsi* Georgi Petkov and Zlati Tilev managed to recover in time from the potentially deadly dive.

The 1/6. *Orlyak* pilots also clashed repeatedly with large number of 'Lightnings'. After all was over and the D.520s landed, they could report two 'kills'. The first victor was *Poruchik* Bogdan Y. Iliev³⁸, an 'old hand', schooled in Germany in 1938. In March 1944, he was the commander of Fighter School based at Aşen, where 'green' pilots were assigned to learn the trade. It was his very first 'live' mission and very first combat flight aboard the D.520. The lone flying Iliev clashed repeatedly with groups of P-38s. He had several close calls with the numerically superior enemy, of which he could escape only by either pushing his mount into a steep dive, or deliberately spinning, cutting the engine off to avoid fire if hit. Only his outstanding piloting skills and a fair share of pilot's luck saved him from succumbing to the Americans' hails of bullet. The performance and sturdiness of the French fighter type also helped him survive. He returned home from the mêlée on the last drops of fuel. After landing on Bozhurishte airfield and pushing back the cockpit canopy, Iliev slowly emerged. He was visibly shaken, fatigued, but victorious. The ground crew later counted more than twenty holes in his Dewoitine's airframe and

31 According to the commander of the Bulgarian 1st Occupation Corps, the German fighters did not take off because that Thursday the pilots were on leave in the city.

32 Take-off was slightly delayed due to bomb damage to the landing strip, twelve 250-kg bombs damaged the northern half of the runway and two 500-kg its end during the previous day's night raid. However, the bomb craters in the runway were quickly patched by a collective effort of the airfield's complement by 9:00 am.

33 Based on squadron commander Kovachev's post-war memoir, his *yato* was already rearmed with the "Messerschmitt" (Bf 109G) in January 1944, and only 642. *Yato* was still flying the D.520 at that time. However, documents contradict his recollection.

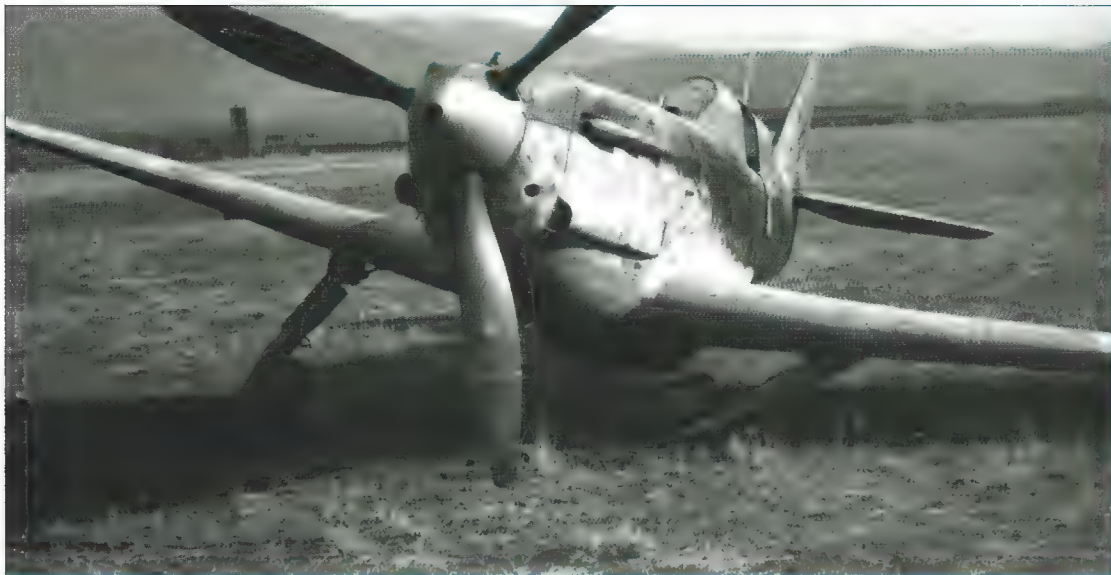
34 His last name is often erroneously spelled as Mateev.

35 Occasionally, his family name is spelled Stoytsev.

36 The combat diary of 2/6. *Orlyak* identifies the victims of *Ppor.* Gigov and *Ppor.* Stoitsev as 'Lightning'.

37 According to Todor Rozev, at the moment of his death, *Kpt.* Boyadzhiev served in 1/6. *Orlyak*.

38 His family name (surname) is often given as Yordanov, which, in fact, was his middle name.



As soon as transition training to the new aircraft type started in late September 1943, the first accidents happened. The initial, photographically documented incident took place on 12 October, when D.520, No. 829 (NU+BQ, 67/7077), was damaged. The pilot, Podofitser Simeon V. Penchev of 652. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, could not use the brakes after landing on Karlovo due to faulty compressed air bottle and crashed. The damage assessment of the aircraft was 60%, which seems rather harsh based on the damage visible on these post-accident photos.



On 13 October 1943, it was the turn of Poruchik Zemen T. Dimitrov of 642. Yato to slightly damage his mount while training. His aircraft, No. 807 (NT+QE, 52/7077), was damaged while taxiing on Karlovo only 10%, which seems about right by looking at the post-accident photos.



several more in the engine, which was repairable, though³⁹. *Por.* Iliev was eventually awarded with one victory for a 'Lightning' that reportedly crashed into Plachkovitsa Mountain following an air battle over Kochani, in Macedonia. It would be the sole air victory of his career. *Poruchik* Bogdan Iliev was awarded with the 'Order of Bravery' and the 'Aleksandăr Nevski' Order.

Another victory claim was filed by his group mate, the 31-year-old *Poruchik* Vasil P. Shishkov, also an experienced veteran pilot. This was also confirmed, thus rewarded with 1 point⁴⁰. The P-38 reportedly crashed at Gălăbnik. These few victories did not come without pain, though. Two D.520 pilots were killed in action and another two – initially also believed killed – had to bail out after being shot down. A couple of other D.520s were damaged in the mêlée, like the mount of *Podporuchik* Petăr K. Petrov of 642nd *Yato* whose oil cooler was punctured by a bullet and had to force land at Voluyak.

Todor 'Tedi' Vălkov remembers⁴¹ that after the epic 30 March battle died down, *Podporuchik* Nikola R. Kolev landed, opened the cabin and started to cry – “*They killed Kuzmov and Kasiyanov!*”, he shouted. However, luckily, he was in error, as both men survived the ordeal. He only saw the two D.520s being shot down, assuming their pilots perished. This was not the case, however. The D.520 flown by *Ppor.* Bozhidar D. Kuzmov was hit in combat, he bailed out over Vakarel. He was luckier than his aforementioned colleague, *Por.* Ivan D. Kasiyanov, as he could reach the ground safely, uninjured. There is reference to a certain *Podporuchik* Ivan Kisiyakov of 1/6. *Orlyak*, who reportedly was also hit in combat that day, without any further details being available, however. It could very well be that the clerk misspelled the name of Ivan Kasiyanov, hence the error.

Contrary to the eventful combat day for the pilots of 2/6. and 1/6. *Orlyatsi*, the activity of the third D.520-equipped fighter group, 4/6., was lacklustre. This is how the unit's combat diary summed up that day: “*Order received from the [air force] command to Karlovo airfield at 11:30 << Around 500 enemy aircraft over Pernik, heading towards Sofia. Take off in the direction of Sofia.>> The aircraft took off at 11:30 [sic!]. No enemy was discovered over Sofia. Takeoff by Poruchik Ganchev, Podporuchik Arnaudov and Feldfebel Daskalov.*” The D.520 *troyka* landed without any action.

When the battle died down shortly after noontime, the following Bulgarian victory tally emerged for D.520 pilots: two 'Lightnings' downed (1-1 point) and three others damaged (0 point each). A 'Fortress' was also heavily damaged, earning 1-1 point for each *dvoyka* member. It was a meagre result when compared to the Bf 109G-pilots' achievements, who scored a record 29 victory points, and even more faint when weighing in the two dead pilots, another one wounded and four aircraft lost. The US raiders actually lost (besides the four bombers) only a single P-38G (S/N 42-13452 of the 14th FG, 37th FS), which became separated from its squadron and crashed in the Plachkovitsa Mountain, in Macedonia (victim of *Por.* Iliev). The 'Lightning' pilot, 1st Lt. Charles C. Townsend, was listed as 'missing in action'.

US fighter pilots filed for an impressive number of claims following the raid, including the only ones specifically against 'De-520s'. The 95th FS claimed two 'Me-109s', two 'Me-309s' [sic! probably D.520s] and an 'FW-190' downed over Sofia, with a further 'Me-109' and 'Me-309' damaged in the same area. The next bunch of victories were reported by the 94th FS over Slivnitsa, when a 'Me-109G' and a 'De-520's' were downed, two 'De-520s' and an 'FW-190' damaged. Four 'Me-109, or D.520' fighters, as noted in the files, were further claimed as victories; however, these were downgraded later on to 'probably' only. A sole pilot of the 71st FS also claimed a D.520 over Slivnitsa. The third group of victories were claimed over Leskovats, now in Serbia, where besides a single 'Me-109' confirmed and another probable one, a motley of six aircraft were reported as damaged: two 'Me-109', two 'FW-190' and a 'MC.202' and 'Re.2000' each. Finally, a 'MC.205' was reported as 'killed' 40 miles south-east of Skopje. The grand total of ten confirmed and five probable victories, completed by eleven damaged ones was far from the actual losses of the Bulgarians, this being yet another case of significant overclaim by the US side.

The Americans performed no more raids against Bulgarian targets for over two weeks. They concentrated on the neighbouring Rumania instead. However, the route towards the vital Ploesti oilfields led through Bulgaria – both ways. The Bulgarian fighter pilots took the chance of catching unescorted bombers, some already damaged, on their way back to their base and occasionally attacked them. Such opportunities occurred on 4 and 5 April, respectively. On the first occasion, all four fighter *orlyatsi* of the 6. *Polk* (regiment) took off in full force: 28 D.520s of the 1/6., 23 Bf 109Gs and 6 D.520s of the 2/6., 24 Bf 109Gs of the 3/6. and 12 D.520s of the 4/6. These figures amount to a record of 93 fighters, probably the most Bulgarian warplanes that were up in the air in a real alarm. That occasion was also when the most D.520s took off in a real combat mission: 46. This number was half of the entire VNVV fighter force thrown into combat.

39 Mikhail Grigorov recalls in his memoirs that 78 holes were counted in the airframe, in total.

40 There is information in effect that *Por.* Shishkov's victory was later downgraded to an 'efficient attack' only and the victory point removed from his score; however, that victory point is included in the official list of victories (see annex).

41 Thanks to Teodor 'Ted' Muhovski for conveying this memoir snippet, as told him by Mr. Vălkov on 7.06.2018.



On 21 October 1943, the aircraft flown by Podof. Marin I. Dzhudzhev of 652. Yato, No. 819 (60/7077), fell into a spin and crashed to the ground at Kurtovo, near Karlovo base. Apparently, not much was left of the airframe, except for the charred tail section.

Following day, the 5th, the Bulgarians preyed again on stragglers returning from Rumania. This time, 83 VNVV fighters were up in the air when the alarm went off. Of these, 45 were D.520 – a close match to the previous day's tally. While the 28 fighters belonging to 2/6. *Orlyak* engaged the 'Lightnings' soon after they took off at 13:25, the other *orlyatsi* pilots jumped on the bombers. At the end, only a Bf 109G-pilot of 2/6. *Orlyak* was credited with a four-engine bomber. The dozen pilots of 4/6. *Orlyak* that took off in alarm returned home without finding the enemy in the Oryahovo-Lom area where they were guided to. Therefore, no D.520 pilot was victorious that day.

The combat diary of 4/6. *Orlyak* lists two more uneventful combat missions, for 15 and 16 April. The first day is summed up, as follows: "Takeoff ordered in alarm mode. Order received from the [air force] command to Karlovo airfield at 11:35, to intercept the enemy going to and coming back from Rumania. [Designated patrol] area over Ostrov, near Oryahovo. The *orlyak* took off at 11:45. The enemy was not found in the area. Takeoff performed by Poruchik Gunchev, Podporuchik Lyuben Nikolov, Gichev, Georgiev, Feldfebel Atanasov and Podofitser Kosyu Stoyanov. Landing at 12:50." Next day's alarm take-off proved to be false, as the "unidentified aircraft coming from south at 3000 m" intercepted over Stara Zagora, at 14:30, were actually five German Junkers Ju 52/3m transports. The 4/6. *Orlyak* pilots landed again empty handed, as did the airmen of the other two *orlyatsi*: 2/6. and 3/6.

The 17th of April 1944 turned out to be the 'dark day' for Bulgarian fighter pilots. That fateful day saw the première of the famed and feared P-51 in Bulgarian skies. The 'Mustangs' were accompanied by equally feared 'Thunderbolts'. The 'Lightnings', well known to the Bulgarian airmen, did not represent a surprise any more. That day, 46 P-51s, 24 P-47s and 44 P-38s escorted 250 B-24s in a bombing raid against the marshalling yard of Sofia – the ninth and last daylight air attack against the capital. What the Bulgarians could oppose them with was a total of only 37 fighters (30 Bf 109Gs and 7 D.520s). 2/6. *Orlyak* contributed 18 aircraft (four Bf 109G *chetvorki* and one D.520 *dvoyka*) – the entire serviceable fleet it commanded – which took off at 11:45. 1/6. *Orlyak* could contribute only a meagre five D.520s. Curiously, 4/6. *Orlyak* did not take-off that target-rich day, despite the group being active in the previous days, when no enemy was found. In addition, 3/6. *Orlyak* raised only 14 Bf 109Gs.

Not only were the Bulgarian fighters outnumbered 3:1, when compared to the total number of American fighters, they were alerted late, and could not climb to the desired altitude by the time the

Despite the impressive show of force, the results achieved were rather meagre: one B-24 shot down, which crashed at Zayechar (3 points), and another one set on fire (2 points). Both successes were awarded to the same D.520 pilot, *Podporuchik* Petăr Petrov⁴² of 2/6. *Orlyak* (in reality, no USAAF warplane was lost over Bulgaria that day). It was Petrov's big day, as scoring five victory points in one combat sortie was an outstanding achievement for any VNVV fighter pilot, let alone one flying the obsolescent D.520. Eventually, *Ppor.* Petăr K. Petrov of the 642nd *Yato* became the highest scoring Bulgarian D.520 pilot (based on the number of victory points). This and his next success, on the 24th of June – scored while flying on a Bf 109G – would propel Petrov to the seventh place in the official list of successful Bulgarian fighter pilots (with a total of eight victory points).

Contrary to the eventful combat day for the pilots of 2/6. *Orlyak*, particularly *Ppor.* Petrov, the activity of the other two D.520-equipped fighter groups was lacklustre. This is how the combat diary of 4/6. *Orlyak* summed up that day: "Takeoff ordered in alarm mode. Order received from the [air force] command to Karlovo airfield at 14:25 <<Intercept the enemy coming from Rumania. Action to be undertaken in the Pleven-Vratsa area.>> The *orlyak* took off at 14:35. The enemy was not found in the area. Takeoff performed by Kapitan Petrov, Poruchik Gunchev, Podporuchik Planinski, Kuzmov, Arnaudov, Georgiev, Tilev, Gitsev, Feldfebel Tonev and Podofitser Kosyu Stoyanov, Dobrovolski, Daskalov⁴³. Landing at 16:00."

42 Additionally, I.A.R. 81C pilot *Adj. av.* Aurel Țifrea of Gr. 1 vână., Esc. 43 vână. ARR, also claimed a B-24 in Bulgarian airspace.

43 Daskalov was listed as *Feldfebel* in the previous entry (for 30 March).



Americans arrived. Moreover, the silhouette of the 'Mustang' was unknown to Bulgarian pilots, who thought that their German comrades came to help with their similarly looking Messerschmitt '109s'⁴⁴. What the unsuspecting Bulgarians got instead of the much-needed help was a hail of bullets coming from above, while they were still climbing. In the matter of minutes, ten aircraft and six pilots were lost. Particularly badly hit was the 2/6. *Orlyak*, which lost eight aircraft, two others force landed after being damaged. Four men of this unfortunate fighter group were killed in the brief but ferocious mêlée with the Americans, four additional ones took to their parachutes and two more belly landed with their stricken machines, escaping alive.

Among the dead were both Dewoitine pilots of the 2/6. *Orlyak* who ventured to engage the superior enemy: *Poruchik* Veselin N. Rachev and his wingman, *Podofitser* Atanas A. Krăstev. The former – who had received his 1st Lt. rank just the day before – crashed at Soyka, near Dupnitsa, while the latter at Lesnovo, near Ihtiman. NCO Krăstev was posthumously promoted to junior officer, 2nd Lt. (*Podporuchik*) and decorated with "Order of Bravery" 4th Grade, 2nd Class.

When the survivors of 2/6. *Orlyak* landed at 13:10, they learned with stupor that more than half of their comrades would not return to the base on their wings. The lucky ones eventually returned on their feet (some after time spent in hospital), while the unlucky ones ended up six feet underground.

The final result achieved by the Bulgarians was meagre. No US bomber was actually shot down, despite several claims by Bf 109G pilots. The D.520 pilots filed no victory claims at all. By contrast, American fighter pilots reported a number of air victories. The P-51-equipped 31st FG claimed a total of three 'Me-109s' downed, including a double scored by the Group Commander, Col. Charles Milton McCorkle, and four others damaged, all over Sofia between 12:15-13:00. The 317th FS of the 325th FG, flying P-47s, filed claims for four 'Me-109s' and a further one probably downed over Sofia and west of it. The overall total of seven destroyed and four damaged fighters was actually less than the real losses inflicted on the Bulgarians! Most probably, a couple more were downed or damaged by the bombers' on-board gunners, who claimed, as usual, a grossly exaggerated number of 'kills': fourteen destroyed and two more damaged. Thus, it can be concluded that in contrast to the Bulgarian *Strela* fighter pilots, the Americans this time did not 'overclaim', but rather 'underclaim'.

This bloody April day turned out to be the second to last one when the USAAF directly targeted Bulgaria. Priorities and diminishing resources constrained USAAF commanders to shift focus onto Rumania and its ever-vital oilfields around Ploesti. From then on, American warplanes used Bulgarian airspace only as thoroughfare to Rumania and back. This switch in strategy did not mean the Bulgar-

On 2 November 1943, *Poruchik* Ivan P. Vătov of 662. Yato – who escaped alive a serious incident less than a month earlier – died aboard a D.520. While flying in a four-finger formation (*chetvorka*) at 1200 m, his aircraft, No. 840 (74/7077), suddenly lost speed (being the inner aircraft during a sharp turn at low altitude), started to dive and penetrated the ground near Karlovo, exploding to pieces. Not much was left of this aircraft as well, except for the twisted tail section.

⁴⁴ The Americans also often mistook the silhouette of the 'Mustang' to the Bf 109. To such misidentification fell victim the 'Mustang' of Lt. Edward Baetjer of the 309th FS, 31st FG (S/N 43-6459, coded WZ-Q), on 16 April, which was shot down by a trigger-happy B-24 turret gunner; the pilot escaped by chute north of Nish. As the gunner later explained the involuntary shootdown: "The P-51 looked very much like an ME-109 from a distance, and in the blurr of battle, who wanted to take a chance?"

Ten days later, yet another D.520 (No. 841, NU+BV, 75/7077) crashed. This time, the pilot escaped alive and the aircraft was recoverable. While returning from a training sortie performed together with his colleague Feldfebel Atanas Petrov, the engine quit in mid-flight, compelling the pilot, Por. Konstantin Todorov Konstantinov, krilo leader, acting commander of 662. Yato, to make a hard landing at Beguntsi (located about 10 km south-east of Karlovo), losing the starboard wing in the process.





ians would not clash with the Americans any more. They tried, sometime half-heartedly, to catch the white-starred warplanes while flying to the target and, particularly, on the way back, when they were disorganised and many, suffering combat damage, straggled, making them easier prey than when flying in tight combat boxes.

The heavily mauled 6th Fighter Polk's *orlyatsi* had also to recover after the 17 April's disaster. New pilots graduated from the fighter school at Dolna Mitropoliya, new fighter aircraft arrived from Germany to replace losses. These were all Bf 109Gs and no D.520, though. The freshmen were then taught combat tactics by seasoned veterans of the 'American Campaign'. Only after these steps could a fighter pilot be considered combat ready and sent against the enemy.

The first occasion to tangle with the 'trespassers' happened on 5 May. That day, a massive raid was carried out against Ploëști, involving a total of 166 B-17s, and 319 B-24s, escorted by 153 P-38s and 42 P-51s. USAAF reports mention some 30 fighters attacking the formation on the return flight, in Bulgarian airspace, after the fighter escort dropped back to cover some stragglers. Another smaller party, made up of 39 B-17s, escorted by 43 P-47s, also hit a target in southern Rumania, close to the Bulgarian border. They reported no enemy opposition on their way back to base. No USAAF victory claims achieved over Bulgaria were been filed, only several 'kills' were reported over occupied Serbia.

That day, the commanding officer of 4/6. *Orlyak*, Kapitan Marin G. Petrov, and his wingman, *Podporuchik* Zahari I. Planinski, attacked a lone four-engine bomber, setting two of its engines on fire (1 point for each pilot). The wounded bird was then reportedly finished off by *Podporuchik* Nikola R. Kolev of the same *orlyak* (2 points). Here is how the fighter group's combat diary describes the activity of that day: "Take-off ordered in alarm mode. Order received from the [air force] command to Karlovo airfield at 14:15, to intercept the enemy sighted in the Craiova-Vidin area, returning from the mission over Rumania. The *orlyak* took off at 14:25. Air combat with 'Fortress II' [bombers] started south of Craiova [Rumania]. The following pilots took part in combat: Kapitan Petrov, Poruchik Gunchev, Podporuchik Planinski, Kuzmov, Kolev, Georgiev, Nikolov, Arnaudov, Velchev; Feldfebel Daskalov and Tonev, Podofitser Kosyu Stoyanov and Dobrovolski. Landing on Telish at 15:55 and on Karlovo at 16:05.

Curiously, the diary compiled sometime post war – judged by the new orthography introduced in 1945 – does not mention any air victory and/or losses. However, we know from other wartime sources of the aforementioned air victory claims, the only ones officially awarded to 4/6. *Orlyak* pilots during the war. Despite the officially sanctioned victories, there is no US bomber reported as lost over Bulgaria that day⁴⁵. Despite the conflicting data, this does not mean that the damaged bomber could not limp further to a location inside occupied Yugoslavia and crash there, or into the sea. These were the last air victory points awarded to Bulgarian D.520 pilots. They ended up the anti-American campaign with a total of 45 victory points, for a total of 13 confirmed and 8 unconfirmed aircraft downed, or damaged.

The last entry of the 4/6. *Orlyak*'s combat diary is dated 18 May 1944. That day, the following events happened: "Take-off ordered in alarm mode. Order received from the [air force] command to Karlovo airfield at 12:10. The *orlyak* took off in pairs, or single aircraft by 12:20, heading towards Karlovo-Plovdiv area. The following pilots took off: Poruchik Gunchev, Podporuchik Planinski, Tilev, Velchev, Feld-

Poor quality view of several D.520s about to take off. Based on the overalls worn by the technicians, as well as the beret headgear, this photo might have been taken in France.

45 A B-24H, S/N 42-52282, was reported as lost over Bulgaria on 6 May, when Rumania was hit again, without any corresponding Bulgarian fighter claim.



Above: Kapitan Nikolay S. Boshnakov led 2/6. Iztrebiteľen Orlyak (2/6th Fighter Group), the first unit to be equipped with the Dewoitine D.520. He was severely wounded in air combat with USAAF fighters on 17 April 1944 – day known to Bulgarian airmen as ‘Black Easter Monday’. His tally is set at four in the official list of air victories; however, in the victory list added to the end of the 2/6. Orlyak’s combat diary, he is on the top, with a typed number 4, and +2 added manually.

Above, right: One of the victors of the encounter with the Americans on 20 December 1943 had the feat codified in his first name: Viktor. Poruchik Viktor E. Pavlov, the 30-year-old commander of 642. Yato – a prominent member of 2/6. Orlyak, one of the ‘old hands’ – was credited with the first victory of a D.520 pilot, achieved over a P-38 shot down at Dolni Pasarel, worth one victory point. It turned to be his sole confirmed victory of the war.

parts. These spare parts had been ordered and are confirmed as available in warehouses [in France]. Their transportation to Bozhurishte, near Sofia, needs to be sped up, stipulates the note.

On 6 June, nine pilots were transferred from the 1/6. and 4/6. Orlyatsi to 2/6. Orlyak, as follows:

- Podporuchik Georgi P. Georgiev
- Podporuchik Nikola R. Kolev
- Podporuchik Bozhidar D. Kuzmov
- Podporuchik Dimităr Daskalov⁴⁶
- Podporuchik Zahari I. Planinski
- Podporuchik Lyuben I. Milenkov
- Feldfebel Todor N. Tonev
- Feldfebel St. Petrov [no further details]
- Podofitser Petăr G. Dobrovolski

Meanwhile, training activity continued in anticipation of further combat. On 7 June, Dewoitine No. 97, piloted by student Podporuchik Tacho Stefanov Popov, rammed into No. 99 standing at the edge of Asen airfield, causing 35% damage. His instructor was the unlucky Feldfebel Todor Tonev.

On 11 June 1944, a massive US formation flew over Bulgaria heading north-east, towards Rumania, in several waves. A D.520 dvojka of 1/6. Orlyak took off from Asen airfield, but returned ingloriously to their base without reporting any ‘kill’. The other orlyak fared the same, the four D.520 pilots ended the day scoreless. Next day, two D.520s (Nos. 39 and 45) were lost at Karolov A/F in an RAF night bombing raid.

Twelve days later, a D.520 chetvorka of 1/6. Orlyak took off, along with their Bf 109G-flying comrades, to combat the surviving ‘Liberators’ returning home from a mission to Rumania. Two Dewoitines aborted the mission early and returned home, while the two others pressed on with the pursuit. Both the leader, Poruchik Bogdan Y. Iliev, and his wingman, Feldfebel Yanko P. Yankov⁴⁷, reported hitting one of the bombers, without causing its demise, however. Both pilots were credited with zero points⁴⁸. This is the last known instance of D.520s taking off in combat missions against the USAAF.

The last time Bulgarian fighters took off to intercept US warplanes was on 26 August 1944. However, by that date, all surviving D.520s had long been relegated to training duty, and took off in anger no more. This situation would last only two more weeks, when the Bulgarian about-face constrained the VNVV command to throw into battle against the new enemy, Germany, all available forces, the obsolescent D.520s included.

Summing up the activity of the Bulgarian fighter pilots in defence of their homeland, it can be stated that they did their best to perform the task assigned to them with the meagre resources they had at their disposal. Although they were generally competent and courageous (or ‘adroit and plucky’, as the Luftwaffe Colonel characterised them in his report, quoted below), less than satisfactory training and

febel Tonev, as well as Podofitser Dobrovolski and Kosyu Stoyanov. Attacks performed by Feldfebel Tonev and Podofitser Dobrovolski. Landing at 13:40. No victory claim was filed. Certainly, 4/6. Orlyak took off in combat missions at later times as well; however, there is no information of this activity recorded in the official diary.

A comprehensive VNVV Order of Battle, dated 31 May 1944, lists the following fighter units still equipped with the D.520:

- 1/6. Iztreb. Orlyak, with 13 serviceable and 30 unserviceable D.520s,
- 4/6. Iztreb. Orlyak, with 12 serviceable and 31 unserviceable D.520s.

The total number of 86 aircraft is not far from the data included in a German secret telegram, dated 8 July. In it, it is mentioned that at that time 80 ‘Devoiltine’ [sic!] 520 are extant with the Bulgarian air force, of which only eight are ready for take-off. The remaining 72 are grounded due to lack of spare

46 Until this point, there were two pilots with surname Daskalov in the 4/6th Fighter Group: Podporuchik Dimităr Daskalov and Feldfebel Yordan Daskalov.

47 Feldfebel Yankov is often erroneously identified as Petrov, or Petkov.

48 Their claims were not even included in the official list of air victories.



uncoordinated air deployment diminished their overall performance. Discipline was not their strongest point, which further reduced efficiency. As highlighted earlier, there were never enough combat ready fighters to face the enemy – intruding in Bulgarian airspace by the hundreds – with success guaranteed. Therefore, American day bombers could bomb Bulgarian targets virtually with impunity, bad weather being their biggest obstacle in achieving their combat goals appropriately and efficiently.

Here is how *Luftwaffe* Oberst Dr. W. Walther⁴⁹ of the 8th *Abteilung* of the *Stab/Dt. Lw. Mission in Bulgarien* summed up his personal experiences while assigned to Bulgaria for about a year, from May [officially 9 June] 1943 onwards (note: his blunt style and direct presentation of his findings summed up in his report, originally not intended for publication, are quoted *ad verbatim*, and the conclusions are solely his, benefiting from hindsight):

“III. Achievements of the Mission [i.e., The *Luftwaffe* Mission to Bulgaria].

1, Training. Given the size of the training detachments, which were always relatively weak in numbers, the initial success achieved by the air defence was satisfactory, but the final result was in no relation to the personnel and materiel expended.

a, Bulgarian fighter pilots were adroit and plucky, but were however so weak numerically that they played no important part, especially after the first losses. Stuka and bomber pilots had to be retrained on fighter aircraft in order to fill the gaps. The German training officer, who subsequently incorporated the fighter forces in Bulgaria as *Jagdfliegerführer* (Controller of Fighter Operations) in the south-eastern fighter command network, had at first to take over the command of what was during the first month of the air attacks the only Bulgarian ME 109 fighter Gruppe. The Dewoitine machines proved unsatisfactory in the hands of the young Bulgarian fighter pilots with their limited flying experience. [underline mine, D.B.]

(...)

c, Thanks to the technical gifts of the Bulgarian trainees, aeronautical technical training was a success. The numbers of aeronautical technical personnel available were therefore always in excess of requirements.”

In conclusion, in the anti-American campaign, lasting eleven months (not counting the epic ‘Operation Tidal Wave’ of 1 August 1943), Bulgarian fighter pilots, flying primarily on the Bf 109G and the D.520 (but also occasionally on the obsolete Avia B.135 and B.534, as well as the Bf 109E) were officially credited with the destruction of a total of 54 enemy aircraft (37 bombers and 17 fighters) and damaging a further 78 aircraft. Of the confirmed number, 15 were assigned to D.520 pilots – the subject of this chapter. Based on the Author’s calculations, by adding up the individual scores, there were 13 confirmed aircraft downed and 8 more damaged. Of this victory tally, eight victims were bombers, valuing three points each (2 B-24s, 4 B-17s, 1 “Stirling” and 1 unidentified four-engine bomber) and five fighters, valuing one point each (all P-38s). Furthermore, eight severely damaged bombers, valued at two points

Personnel of the 2/6. Orlyak, led by Kapitan Nikolay Boshnakov, line up on the snowy Karlovo airfield for report, in the winter of 1943/1944. VNV Commander-in-Chief, General-Mahyor (Maj.-Gen.) Dimităr Ayryanov, at right, listens to the orlyak leader’s report. A couple of D.520s of the fighter group can be seen in the background.

49 For details of Dr. Walther’s quoted post-war report, see the Bf 109G chapter.



This B-17F 'Flying Fortress', S/N 42-30267, called 'Hustlin' Huzzy', of the 341st BS, 97th BG, is seen over snow-covered Bulgarian mountains on its way to bomb Sofia on 10 January 1944. Of the 19 confirmed air victory points attributed to D.520 pilots, twelve were for four 'Flying Fortresses', plus three more for a 'Stirling' (misidentification of the B-17). All four B-17 bombers were credited to 2/6. Orlyak, while the 'Stirling' to a dvoika of 1/6. Orlyak, on that very day – the most successful combat day for Bulgarian Dewoitine pilots. This particular B-17 and its crew were lost to enemy fighters in the Ploesti region, on 23 June 1944.

each (3 B-24s, 3 B-17s and two unidentified four-engine bombers) can be counted. Other warplanes were attacked efficiently, value zero point.

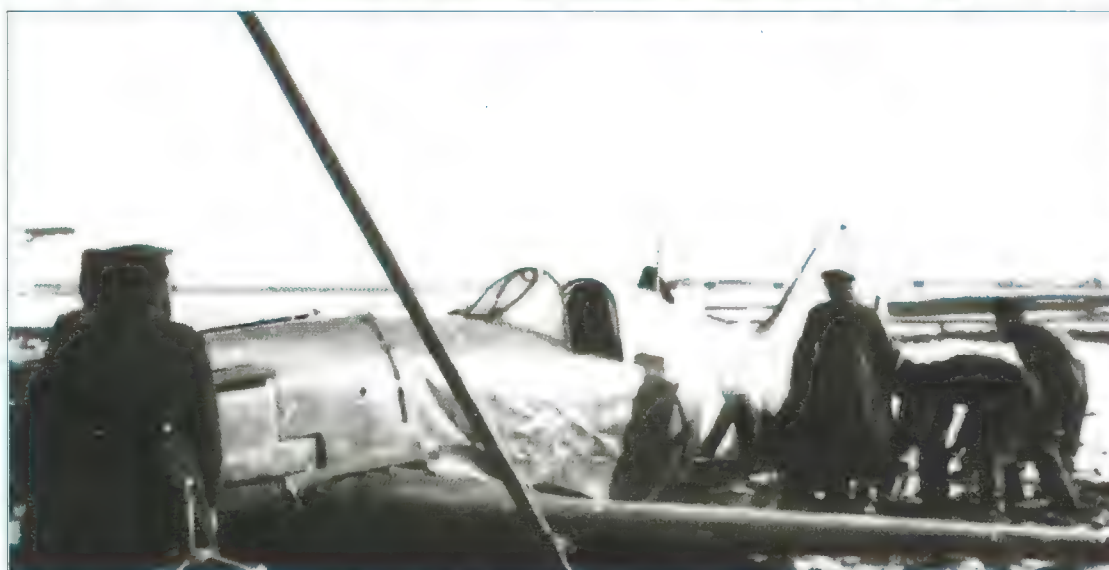
The total number of victory points awarded to D.520 pilots is thus 45 (for details, see Annex). However, several of the claimed victories do not match known US losses, and can be considered overclaims. They achieved this notable result in about 42 combat missions (about 20 performed by 1/6., 13 by 2/6. and at least 9 by 4/6. Orlyak), totalling some 380 sorties (the smallest group, 4/6., logged 63 combat sorties between 10 January and 18 May), performed in about 530 flying hours (only the period between November 1943 and August 1944 was considered). Thus, one aerial victory (destroyed, or damaged aircraft) every 21 combat sorties, or 2.3 missions, one victory point for every 8.8 combat sorties, or about every single mission.

In turn, about ten D.520s were lost in combat missions against US warplanes (seven crashed, several more force landed and had to be written off), more being damaged. Five pilots lost their lives in combat with the Americans, and six additional ones in accidents (see Annex). This was a heavy toll on the small Bulgarian air force pilot cadre. The 'kill' over combat 'loss' ratio is roughly 1.3 to 1 (in reality, it would most probably be an even match). This is an outstanding achievement for the D.520 pilots, in view of the limited resources and capabilities available to them. Their sacrifice in defending their homeland must be respected and told, to the Bulgarians and the world alike.

Turning Against the Germans

In early September 1944, VNVV High Command – along with other Bulgarian political and military decision makers – sensed the "winds of change" and secretly prepared for the exit from the Axis camp.

On 4 September 1944, the order of battle of the VNVV fighter force, concentrated in the 6. Polk, consisted of:



The photos show the recovery of D.520 – what is believed to be Green 13, outlined in white – which had belly landed on the snowy Vrazhdebna in early 1944. This pair of photos was scanned directly from Podporuchik Nikola Nachev's photo album; therefore, most probably depict his machine, which force landed following an air combat on 10 January 1944 (the only combat loss of the D.520-equipped *orlyatsi*). Unfortunately, the serial number in the triangle cannot be clearly read, but it might be 41. The large light grey area on the tail surface, underneath the white triangle, is noteworthy, as are the yellow rudder and elevators.

6. Fighter Polk

- Command post at Boyana, staff and liaison squad at Gabarevo (staff returned to Karlovo base the next day)
- 1/6. *Orlyak* (staff, 612., 622., 632. *Yato*), D.520 – Asen airfield
- 2/6. *Orlyak* (staff, 642., 652., 662. *Yato*), Bf 109G – Sliven airfield
- 3/6. *Orlyak* (staff, 672., 682., 692. *Yato*), Bf 109G – Bozhurishte airfield
- 4/6. *Orlyak* (staff, 712., 722. *Yato*), disbanded, personnel transferred to other fighter *orlyatsi*
- 1. Fighter training course – divided into 1, 2, 3 *orlyatsi*
- 2. Fighter training course – Asen airfield
- Fighter school – Dolna Mitropoliya airfield

On 5 September 1944, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov forwarded a diplomatic note to the Bulgarian government, in which the Soviet Union declared war upon the officially neutral (in the German-Soviet war), practically pro-Axis Bulgaria. Red Army troops, already amassed at the border with Rumania, penetrated into the country three days later without meeting any resistance. This unilateral act was followed by a coup d'état against the ruling Tsarist government on 9 September. The so-called OF (Fatherland Front) – a motley group of leftist politicians and military – took over power in Sofia and the countryside, and declared war upon Germany. However, by then, the Bulgarian Army – Air Force included – was already at *de facto* war with its erstwhile ally, the Germans, withdrawing from Greece through Bulgarian controlled Macedonia. The Bulgarians officially changed sides, declared war upon the IIIrd Reich and joined the Soviet Union in its war against Hitler's Germany.

The new enemy meant totally new tasks for the embattled VNVV. From then on, Bulgarian warplanes performed tactical combat missions, particularly short- and long-range reconnaissance, close air support for their own troops, as well as ground attack against equipment and positions. This was in stark contrast to the air warfare the Bulgarian pilots experienced in combatting the American warplanes.



A smiling Ppor. Hristo Kostakev poses at the nose of a D.520, during the winter of 1944. The yellow engine cowling underside panel is apparent. Notice his signature on the bottom right corner of the print.

At this point, in early September, all available first-line Dewoitines were concentrated in 1/6. *Orlyak*. On the first day of the month, the fighter group listed 16 serviceable D.520s, along with 16 unserviceable ones. They were assigned to its three *yata* (squadrons): the 612th, 622nd and 632nd, as well as the staff flight. The combat activity of the single Dewoitine-equipped *orlyak* was rather limited. In anticipation of taking part in the anti-German campaign, the *orlyak* moved from Asen to Bozhurishte on 14 September with 19 D.520s, to be closer to the new front lines in the west. Then, due to overcrowding, it redeployed to Vrazhdebna air base. The main task assigned to the Dewoitines was air cover for their own bombers and tactical reconnaissance, occasionally mixed with ground attack.

Details of the activity of the D.520s in the anti-German campaign are sketchy. The official combat diary of 1/6. *Orlyak*, compiled post war, starts on 14 September, with the transfer flight mentioned earlier. The first combat mission performed by 1/6. *Orlyak* happened on 17 September, in the Bela Palanka-Pirot area. The entire *orlyak* took part in this opening mission starting at 12:30, with all 16 serviceable D.520s – a record achievement in the anti-German campaign. These were flown by the following pilots: *Mahyor* Yordanov (the freshly promoted C/O of the 6th Polk), *Kpt.* Rusev, *Por.* Gunchev, *Por.* Lazarov, *Por.* Vălchev, *Por.* Ivan Vălchev, *Ppor.* Vaptsarov, *Ppor.* Arnaudov, *Ppor.* Lyuben Ivanov, *Ppor.* Semkov, *Ppor.* Naldzhiev, *Ppor.* Zhelev⁵⁰, *Feldf.* Daskalov, *Feldf.* Naydenov, *Feldf.* Yankov [written in the squadron's war diary as Yanko Petrov] and *Podof.* Belperchemov. One has to note the high percentage of officers (12 men), including one major, who took part in

this premier combat mission against the new enemy, Germany, in comparison to the low number of NCOs (4 men). The ratio in 'regular' combat missions was usually the other way around. One plausible explanation could be that every officer wanted to show openly his allegiance to the new pro-Communist regime, trying to avoid being labelled 'royalist officer' by any means, who is reluctant to face the erstwhile ally.

The second combat mission was carried out on 18 September. That day, the 1/6. *Orlyak* was ordered to secure air supremacy in the area where the Armoured Brigade was located, as well as to cover the Ju 87D-equipped 1/2. *Shtuka Orlyak* during its ground attack of enemy positions at 'Ostri vrăh' (i.e., Pointed Peak), at 11:10. The *orlyak* performed the task with 12 aircraft (instead of the officially requested 20). The fighters were piloted by *Por.* Gunchev, *Por.* Lazarov, *Por.* Tangărov, *Ppor.* Lyuben Ivanov, *Ppor.* Zhelyu Zhelev, *Ppor.* Bisov, *Ofitser kand.* Asparuh Naidenov, *Feldf.* Daskalov, *Feldf.* Yanko Petrov, *Podof.* Belperchemov and *Podof.* Kosyu Stoyanov. All of them returned home without combat damages, and without encountering the enemy in the air. Between 15:20-16:30, 1/6. *Orlyak* performed air cover for the push of the Armoured Brigade westward, again without any loss.

Next day, precisely at 08:00, the commander of the 1/6. *Orlyak* was ordered to send a pair of D.520s to reconnoitre the location of enemy forces in the area of Gyueshevo-Kriva Palanka; Tsarevo Selo-Kochani and Strumitsa-Radovish-Valandovo. The mission, performed by *Ppor.* Vaptsarov and his wingman, *Ppor.* Zhelev, was completed successfully, as were the next two, carried out by *Por.* Vălchev, accompanied by *Feldf.* Shaldărov, as well as *Por.* Rusev and *Feldf.* Daskalov, respectively.

Starting from 19 September, following the arrival of the Soviet Air Force (VVS) in the area, a new quick identification colour was officially introduced on Bulgarian warplanes. Order No. I-1332/20. IX.1944, issued by the Headquarters of the Ministry of War, instructed the following:

"For safety purposes during joint operations with the Soviet air force, the following identification markings are to be implemented on Bulgarian aircraft effective the 19th on this month:

The wingtips are to be painted white, up to 1 meter wide,

Propeller spinners are to be painted white,

A 1/2-m wide white stripe is to be painted around the fuselage, in front of the combat marking.

The old yellow identification markings are to be removed. The new identification markings, described above, are to be brought to the attention of [ground] combat units."

A summary report dated 21 September mentions that 12 *Strelas* and Dewoitines performed reconnaissance flights over the sector held by the 15th Army Division in the Prilep area. The fighters also

50 Curiously, this and the next combat sorties are not included in Zhelyu Zhelev's logbook (see Annex). This discrepancy can be explained either by sloppy record keeping (an unlikely possibility, as airmen received their monetary imbursement based on the logbook, among other), or that this combat sortie did not actually happen! There is also a remote possibility that there were two D.520 pilots with identical last name.



Three pilots from the elusive 4/6. Orlyak (from left to right, ranks as in early 1944): Podporuchik Bozhidar D. Kuzmov, Podporuchik Zahari I. Planinski and Poruchik Ivan D. Kasiyanov. 30 March 1944 was the lucky day for both Kasiyanov and Kuzmov. Both were shot down by US fighters, but both could bail out and save their lives (although Kasiyanov was shot while hanging on his chute, badly wounding his leg; he would not fly again). Zahari 'Tutmanikov', or 'Tuti' Planinski escaped the air battles unscathed; however, he would find his demise on 16 July 1945. While ferrying 'trophy' Bf 109Gs from Hungary to Bulgaria, his mount caught fire near Nish, Yugoslavia. He managed to force land, but could not exit in time and burned to death in the cockpit.



Four officer pilots from the same 4/6. Orlyak: Podporuchik Nikola R. Kolev, Podporuchik Bozhidar D. Kuzmov, Podporuchik Zahari I. Planinski and unknown. They were photographed on 31 March 1944, the day after their lucky escape from the US fighters' wrath. Alive and kicking, with 'terra firma' under their buttocks, no wonder all of them are smiling widely.

strafed enemy positions. Three fighters of unspecified model were damaged by ground fire, but returned safely to the base.

On 22 September, the first D.520 combat loss of the anti-German campaign occurred. The daily operation summary mentions the following (without giving the aircraft type). *"Losses: during this activity [reconnaissance mission over the Tsarevo Selo-Shtip area by a pair of fighters in the morning], one of the aircraft that was hit by anti-aircraft (AA) fire in area of Tsarevo Selo landed in the area of village Konevo, near Kyustendil. Another fighter aircraft, piloted by Lieutenant Dimităr Dimitrov Sotirov, was shot down by AA fire over the village Izvor, northeast of Prilep. The fate of the pilot is unknown."* As Lt. Sotirov flew on a Bf 109G-6, and his name is listed among the Bf 109 pilots who died in combat, the first entry must refer to the Dewoitine. Indeed, the 1/6. Orlyak's combat diary mentions laconically: *"Podpor. Semkov's machine was damaged, force landed in our territory."* The hand-written combat diary of the VNVV gives more details: *"In Prilep-Veles area 2nd Lt. Vasil Anghelov Semkov of 1/6. Orlyak, flying with D.520, No. 27, force landed near Konovo (Kyustendil area). Pilot wounded, aircraft damaged."* Another source gives the aircraft serial number as 17, which is less probable, however (still extant with 1/6. Orlyak on 27.07.1945).

The combat events of the next day ended in unclear outcomes. *Podofitser* Ivan I. Pavlov is recorded as 'killed in action', although with question marks typed in the areas reserved for location and cause of



Above: D.520-pilot Poruchik Bogdan Y. Iliev, member of the 1/6. *Orlyak*, was credited with the destruction of a P-38 'Lightning' over Plachkovitsa Mountain on 30 March 1944 – the sole 'kill' of this career. Indeed, P-38-pilot 1st Lt. Charles C. Townsend of the 14th Fighter Group, 37th Fighter Squadron, was reported as missing over the very same area. On 30 March 1994, on the 50th anniversary of his air victory, Bogdan Iliev boarded again an airplane and flew over the same area of Plachkovitsa Mountain. Col. (ret.) Iliev, recipient of the Order of Bravery and the Order of 'Alexander Nevski', died in 1996, at the age of 80. On 16 August 2016, a statue was erected in his memory at Montana. (formerly Ferdinand)

Above, Right: Podporuchik Dimităr S. Daskalov was member of the elusive and short-lived D.520-equipped 4/6. *Orlyak* until 6 June 1944, when he was transferred to the Bf 109G-equipped 2/6. *Orlyak*.

for German forces. The *dvoika* took off at 9:30. Soon after, they spotted enemy forces crossing the River Pchinya and heading to the direction of Kriva Palanka. Then they decided to strafe the discovered ground targets. *Feldfebel* Yankov set a vehicle on fire, while another one started to smoke. Near Kriva Palanka, at 5 km distance, another vehicle column was entering the town. *Feldfebel* Yankov attacked that column as well. While pulling out, he saw his wingman, Pavlov flying away, heading towards Kyustendil. Later on, Ivan Pavlov's D.520 was found force-landed near Kyustendil, with the pilot heavily wounded. It is unclear whether the aircraft was damaged by ground fire, or there was a technical failure compelling the pilot to force land. The combat diary of 1/6. *Orlyak* does not say the wounded pilot eventually died, but he is included in the list of fallen airmen. A conflicting report, mentioned later, dated 19 May 1945, lists D.520, No. 6, of 1/6. *Orlyak*, being damaged in an accident, with *Podof.* Ivan I. Pavlov at the controls. The Author believes it would be too much of a coincidence to have two pilots with the same name, serving at the same unit, flying on the same aircraft type. Therefore, it can be concluded that eventually Pavlov did not succumb to his wounds, as given in the official VNVV list, and returned to flying at one point. Accordingly, the Author crossed out his name in the list of fallen D.520 pilots, published in the Annex.

The next few days went by quietly. On 25 September, the VNVV command sent a Ju 87D *Stuka* *yato*, covered by a Dewoitine *krilo*, to neutralise an enemy artillery battery spotted 7 km south of Bela Palanka. The mission ended without result, as the target could not be discovered due to low clouds. Between 17:00–18:00, a fighter pair patrolled over the Piroto area, as top cover against enemy aircraft. This mission also ended without incident, as enemy aircraft did not show up in the area. Next day, ten Dewoitines took off to cover eight Do 17 *Uragan* bombers targeting enemy positions 3.5 km west of Strumitsa. All aircraft returned home. That day, the status of the 1/6. *Orlyak* was summed up by the VNVV's Air *Eskadra* (Division), as follows: air base at Bozhurishte, 28 pilots (17 officers and 11 NCOs) are available. The aircraft park consists of 14 airworthy and 75 (sic!) unserviceable D.520s. This high number of out-of-order Dewoitines cannot be explained, as certainly more than eleven such aircraft had been written off by that date; therefore, it must be a typo (7, instead of 1).

On 28 September⁵², there was another ambiguous combat event that needs to be clarified. *Podofitser* Asen N. Petkov is the second D.520 pilot included in the list of airmen fallen during the anti-German campaign. In fact, his D.520, No. 57⁵³, was shot down by ground fire at Shtip, in Macedonia. Question marks are typed after the location, as well as at the cell where the cause of loss should be given. In the VNVV combat diary he is listed as 'missing in action'. In the combat diary of 1/6. *Orlyak* the following is written: "Kandidat podofitser Asen Petkov probably shot down by anti-aircraft artillery at Shtip, did not return". In an original period document summing up the results of the anti-German campaign (from 9 Sept. to 30 Nov.), Petkov is listed as 'missing in action' (one of the three airmen, the other two being Bf 109G pilots). In a comprehensive list of dead Bulgarian airmen, Petkov is listed as "force landed [behind

death. No further details are mentioned in the original machine-typed VNVV loss list. The daily operation summary for that day sheds some light onto this event. That day, eight reconnaissance flights were performed in the Veles-Gradsko-Kumanovo-Kriva Palanka area, each by a pair of fighters, in total 16 aircraft. At the chapter 'losses', the following entry was typed: "Losses: pilot Podofitser Ivan Pavlov with a Dewoitine fighter did not return. It is presumed that he was shot down by AA fire. Three other fighter aircraft were hit by anti-aircraft fire, two of them badly damaged. All damaged aircraft landed on their respective airfields."

Following further research, the following story emerges: *Feldfebel* Yanko P. Yankov⁵¹ and *Podofitser* Ivan I. Pavlov were ordered to reconnoitre the area of Kumanovo-Kriva Palanka in searching

51 *Feldfebel* Yankov is often erroneously identified as Petrov, or Petkov.

52 A comprehensive list of dead Bulgarian soldiers reports the date of his demise as 22 September.

53 Aircraft No. 57 was written off on 8 October 1944. A newly found document gives the crash location as: "Greece".

enemy lines] and captured (on 22 Sept. 1944)", hinting that he died in captivity. However, recently, prominent Bulgarian Author, D. Nedialkov, came up the following story (published after this manuscript had been concluded), without giving the source of his information: "*The aircraft of Kandidat podofitser Petkov took several heavy hits, which forced him to make a belly landing behind enemy lines, south of the Vardar River [the river flows at about 25 km distance from Shtip]. The landing was rough, and the pilot was injured. Despite his wounds, he set fire to the aircraft and headed east. He initially fell into the hands of Greek partisans. They handed him over to British forces, which took him to a POW camp near Thessaloniki. He escaped from the camp and, after many travails [sic!], returned to his home country on 22 December.*"⁵⁴ This story raises several questions; nevertheless, it's a plausible explanation of the ambiguity surrounding the fate of *Podof. Petkov*. For the sake of fairness, the Author indicates the cause of Petkov's presence in the list of fallen D.520 pilots found in the Annex as 'missing in action' – in line with the still valid official version – until firm proof of his survival emerges.

Little wonder relatively many D.520s were lost in comparison to the small number deployed over the front, as the pilots were not experienced in the new combat tactics, including strafing ground targets, and their obsolescent, un-armoured machines were vulnerable to ground fire, even small arms fire. Combat attrition reduced the number of serviceable D.520s available in early October to only a dozen (25% reduction in less than three weeks).

Starting with 29 September, the air activity over the Macedonian front diminished, mainly due to bad weather conditions. This lull in combat activity lasted less than a week, however. On 5 October, 14 combat missions were performed by a total of 52 combat aircraft, among them an unspecified number of D.520s. The fighters: "*performed recce flights by individual aircraft, escorted own bombers and Stukas, and also attacked enemy trucks and positions in bombed area during these escorts.*" That busy day all fighter aircraft losses were suffered by the two Bf 109G-equipped *orlyatsi*, the D.520s escaped unhurt.

Increasingly, the superior Bf 109Gs took over most tasks assigned to fighters, the obsolescent D.520s being reserved only a secondary role. The French aircraft type is mentioned less and less in the daily combat reports. Accordingly, losses diminished as well, without disappearing, however.

On the last day of October, a D.520 *dvoyka* failed to return from a combat mission to Bela Palanka. Initially, both pilots, *Poruchik* Konstantin T. Konstantinov, and his wingman, *Feldfebel* Yanko P. Yankov, were listed as killed in action in the official airmen loss list. However, their names were later on crossed out, as it turned out that both survived, they belly landed close to the target. Both aircraft, Nos. 66 and 70, were eventually recovered, as both were reported as extant with the Fighter School on 27 July 1945.

Order of Battle dated 1 November 1944 lists 12 serviceable and 13 unserviceable D.520s part of the 1/6. *Orlyak* (the two aforementioned temporary losses were probably not counted yet). The number of available aircraft was diminished by one on 18 November, when the aircraft of *Podporuchik* Zlati Slavov Tilev – formerly of 4/6. *Orlyak* – failed to return from a combat sortie. It turned out that the pilot had to bail out of his mount, No. 24, set ablaze by ground fire, and landed safely in his own territory, in the Prishtina area. This is the last known combat loss of Bulgarian D.520s.

In view of the diminished number of available warplanes, the D.520 pilots were pressed by the Air Force Command to keep flying combat missions throughout November, despite the fighter type's low serviceability and combat effectiveness. On 3 November, five D.520s escorted a bomber formation consisting of six Do 17M level bombers and eleven Ju 87D dive bombers against German positions west of Kumanovo. Over the target, the Bulgarian formation was jumped by a couple of *Luftwaffe* Fw 190s of



Bulgarian airmen play *табла* (*tabla*), Balkan equivalent of the backgammon board game, near a D.520 fighter, while waiting for the next sortie sometime in mid-1944.

⁵⁴ Dimitar Nedialkov: 'French Fighters Dewoitine D.520 in defence of the Bulgarian sky', Albatros MDV, Sofia, Bulgaria, 2016, page 104.

Bare-chested airmen, many in shorts and barefoot, listen to a briefing by an equally casually dressed officer on a hot summer day in 1944, at Karlovo air base. Notice the spiral-nose Dewoitine fighter, at left.



Below, right: Frontal view of a spiral-nose D.520. The underside of the engine cowling appears to be yellow. Notice the elaborate camouflage scheme applied to the hangar, at left.



Below: This secret German document of DLM Bulgarien - Gruppe Technik from 25 August 1944 [day taken from a secret telegram with identical text sent by Gen. Q 6 Abt. IB to DLM Bulgarien-Gruppe Technik] informs that no further spare parts for D.520 airframes and engines will be available due to "traffic situation". The upcoming political events in Bulgaria would have hindered such delivery anyhow.

Geheim

~~Geheim~~

8.44

DLM Bulgarien - Gruppe Technik

S S D

Bezug: Fg. Lfl.Kdo.3/O.Qu. Nr.29304 A/ 44 geh. vom 3.8.44
Betr.: Zellenersatzteile für Dewoitine 520

Aufgrund der herrschenden Verkehrslage kann für die Zukunft nicht mehr mit Ersatzteilen für Zelle und Motor für das Muster Dewoitine 520 gerechnet werden.

Oberkommando der Luftwaffe
Generalquartiermeister
Nr.13041/44 g. (6.Abt.IB)

Erh.

6 1 1

II./SG 10, which downed one of the *Stukas*. The D.520 air escort failed to react, so the victorious German "*Schlachters*" could leave the area unharmed.

On 19 November, the fighter escort tasked to cover four Avia B-71 *Zherav* bombers targeting Zhitnitsa (? perhaps Prishtina) railway station failed to meet them, leaving the bombers without air cover. This failed escort mission was the last combat activity of the Bulgarian D.520s. Five days later, combat operations against the Germans officially ceased for most air units. They were ordered to withdraw to their winter stations. At this point, only nine serviceable D.520s were listed in the Air *Eskadra's* aircraft roster. There were also 15 unserviceable D.520s within the unit, bringing the total number of aircraft to 24. This number fell short by 16 units to the theoretical strength of a standard fighter *orlyak*, which should have consisted of 40 aircraft.

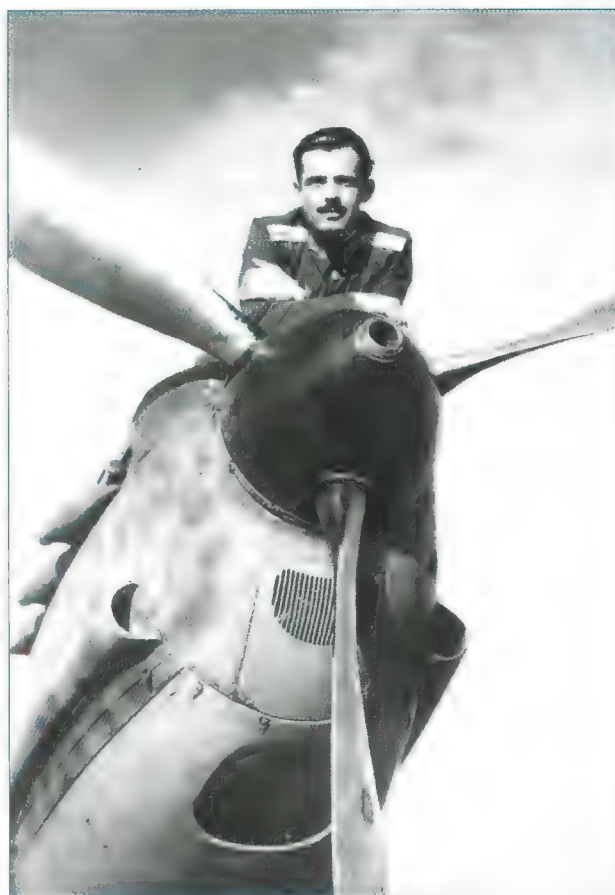
Number of serviceable D.520s of 1/6. *Orlyak* (1 September-1 December 1944)

| Date | 1.09 | 14.09 | 17.09 | 26.09 | 1.10 | 7.10 | 15.10 | 30.10 | 1.11 | 15.11 | 20.11 | 30.11 | 1.12 |
|------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| No. | 16 | 19 | 20 | 14 | 13 | 12 | 17 | 12 | 12 | 11 | 11 | 9 | 9 |

During the so-called ‘Patriotic War’, the 6. *Iztrebitelen Polk* (6th Fighter Regiment) reported a total of 793 combat sorties performed, losing seven D.520s (and nine Bf 109Gs), and a total of seven pilots (data for the Bf 109G-equipped *orlyatsi* included) – all victims to enemy ground fire and accidents. Of the fallen airmen only one was possibly a D.520 pilot, his fate being inconclusive (officially, he was posted as ‘missing in action’; however, may have survived after all). The D.520-equipped 1/6. *Orlyak* performed 60 combat missions, totalling 229 sorties, in about 328 flight hours spent in the air. Some 120 vehicles, three tanks, 10 artillery tractors, two tankers, two locomotives and two light-calibre anti-aircraft batteries were reportedly neutralised by Bulgarian fighters. In addition, 14 enemy aircraft were claimed destroyed on the ground during strafing. It has to be noted that the bulk of these results were achieved by the Bf 109Gs, however.

Even if combat activity was officially over for the bulk of the Bulgarian air force, the D.520s included, losses did not stop. On 26 December, *Ppor.* Rusi Piperov of the 1st [actually 1/6.] *Orlyak* was tasked to fly from Bozhurishte to Asën-Kazanlāk. When approaching to land, the engine cooling system failed because of a fluid leak; the pilot had to belly-land his mount, No. 88, causing 45% damage.

Despite the operational and non-combat losses, the Order of Battle of 1/6. *Orlyak*, dated 1 January 1945, lists 12 combat ready and 15 unserviceable aircraft. This can be explained by the possibility that a few D.520s were drawn from the fighter school to replenish the ranks of the combat *orlyak*.



Swansong

Parallel to the return of warplanes to their home air bases in December 1944, the peacetime organisation of the *Văzdushni Voyski* was initiated on the New Year's Eve of 1945. Accordingly, the air force organisation was to be restructured along Soviet air force doctrine lines. The obsolescent German, French and Czechoslovak equipment was to be replaced eventually with Soviet technology. Consequently, the current main fighter aircraft types (Bf 109G and D.520) had to give way to Soviet types, particularly to the Yak-9. On 14 March 1945 – with the war in Europe still ongoing with full force – a military agreement (No. 7827) was signed by Sofia and Moscow, which stipulated the handover to the Bulgarians of 343 combat aircraft by the end of the summer. This number included 120 Yak-9 fighters (fitted with M-105 engines), plus two dual-control Yak-9Vs (known to the Bulgarians as Yak-9U, or UYak-9).

The influx of Soviet , starting from mid-1945, meant the end of the combat service for the aircraft types used during the war, the D.520s included. The few survivors were relegated to training duty, joining the ones already assigned to the Fighter School located at Asën. Indeed, Order of Battle dated 1 April 1945 lists 1/6. *Orlyak* as located at Asën. According to his logbook, fighter pilot student *Podporuchik* Zhelyu Zhelev started to fly the ‘Devoatin’ on 24 April 1944 at Asën airfield. He continued flying on the D.520 until 13 June 1945 (in 1945, he flew Nos. 48, 76 and 99). Then he was transferred to Balchik centre, where he started conversion training on the Yak-9M fighter, using the dual-control Yak-9U.

Needless to say, training by inexperienced pilots meant a high attrition rate of the already worn-out and fatigued matériel. Such an accident is recorded for 19 May 1945, when D.520, No. 6/7077, of 1/6. Fighter *Orlyak*, with *Podof.* Ivan Pavlov at the controls, was damaged during landing on Asën-‘Kazanlāshko’ (i.e., Kazanlāk) air base. The damage must have been light, as this particular aircraft is listed as extant with 1/6. *Orlyak* on 27 July of the same year. On that date, 18 aircraft were listed with the aforementioned regiment. Of these, the following nine were slated to stay with the unit: Nos. 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 17, 18, 32 and 34, while the following nine were earmarked to be handed over to the 2/6. *Orlyak*: Nos. 35, 37, 38, 41, 48, 51, 53, 62 and 63. Further 27 were extant at the Fighter School (total count: 45 D.520s).

Curiously, from the start of the new year, the number of serviceable D.520s of the 1/6. *Orlyak*, led by *Kapitan* Aleksandār H. Gunchev, increased every month. Despite its notable serviceability, the obsolescent French type was abruptly removed from first line service in July 1945, being replaced by the newcomer Soviet Yak-9 (60 aircraft). In the Order of Battle of 1 August, no trace of the D.520 is left.

A pilot perched atop the flat-top engine cowling of a trainer D.520, at Dolna Mitropoliya Fighter School, in mid-1944. Notice the solid-painted spinner, possibly red.

Monthly no. of serviceable/unserviceable D.520s in combat units (1/6. *Orlyak*), August 1944-August 1945

| Date (day.month) | 1.08 | 1.09 | 1.10 | 1.11 | 1.12 | 1.01 | 1.02 | 1.04 | 1.05 | 1.06 | 1.08 |
|------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Serviceable | 36 | 16 | 13 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 14 | 22 | 24 | 24 | 0 |
| Unserviceable | 26 | 16 | 14 | 13 | 15 | 15 | 13 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Total | 62 | 32 | 27 | 25 | 24 | 27 | 27 | 27 | 27 | 27 | 0 |



Kapitan Marin G. Petrov was named commanding officer of the short-lived 4/6.

Orlyak. Command of the 1/6. *Orlyak* was taken over by Kpt. Rusi I. Rusev. The smallest fighter group logged, based on the incomplete combat diary, 63 combat sorties in seven combat missions, performed between 30 March and 18 May 1944.

The D.520 flyers of this unit were credited with two four-engine bombers probably shot down (2+1+1=4 victory points), of which Kpt. Petrov was credited with one point. He was hastily tried and executed following the leftist coup d'état of 9 September 1944, like so many other 'royalist' officers, who overnight became 'enemy of the people'.

Lack of spare parts further diminished the number of airworthy aircraft. The surviving D.520s⁵⁵ were written off in increased number in the second half of 1945: two on 31 August (Nos. 13 and 30), three on 4 September (Nos. 70, 96 and 99), another one two days later (No. 91), seven on 17 September (Nos. 23, 25, 27, 44, 80, 81 and 85) and two on 26 November (Nos. 73 and 88). Write-offs continued the next year as well, as follows: one aircraft each on 25 April (No. 69) and on 27 May (No. 59), while on 13 June five aircraft were taken off script (Nos. 9, 35, 54, 63, 86). They were followed by a D.520 (No. 97) on 15 October. A dozen D.520s were scrapped on 23 December (Nos. 2, 6, 10, 34, 47, 48, 51, 62, 71, 75, 82, 94).

An accident happened on 1 June 1945, when D.520, No. 82, of 1/6. *Orlyak*, piloted by Por. Todor S. Arnaudov, stopped on its nose while landing on Asen airfield, following a *dvoyka* flight between 9:20 and 10:10 with *orlyak* commander, Kpt. Aleksandăr H. Gunchev. A week later, it was the turn of No. 99 to be damaged, also on Asen airfield. It was war veteran Podof. Kosyu S. Stoyanov, formerly of 4/6. *Orlyak*, who dented his mount. For his negligence, 'Kircho' Stoyanov was sentenced to three days arrest in the barracks. Next day, another D.520 was damaged, this time No. 69. It also happened on Asen airfield, at the hands of Por. Kostadin T. Kostadinov. No information is available on the extend of the damage, but the aircraft was eventually written off ten months later, on 25.04.1946.

A detailed inventory of the VNVV aircraft park for 15 January 1946 lists 28 extant D.520s: 8 serviceable and 20 unserviceable, all with the *Iztrebitelno-shturmova shkola* (i.e., Fighter-Ground Attack School). None were listed with the first-line combat units any more, their place being taken by Yak-9s. Theoretically, a few more D.520s could have been under repair at various workshops; however, no information on those is available.

On 1 October 1946, among the 596 (!) conserved aircraft none was a D.520. Some could be part of the total of 206 stored trainers of unspecified type, though. The same document mentions that 97 aircraft were scrapped in September, no D.520 was among them.

The last write-off records available are for 1947, as follows: six aircraft on 18 February (Nos. 4, 12, 66, 76, 87, 95) and a final two (Nos. 17 and 84, fitted with engine constr. numbers 185 and 589) on 23 May. These were the last such documents found by the author in Bulgarian military archives. However, a few D.520s certainly soldiered on at flying schools up until the end of the year, and possibly beyond (as there are gaps in the write-off lists, for example Nos. 5, 7, 32, 37, 38, 41, 53, 56, 61, 78 and 98 – all extant in 1945).

1947 is the last year any trace of the Dewoitine used in VV service was found by the Author. A couple of photographs showing battered D.520s, wearing the so-called OF markings – certainly different machines judging by their differently painted spinners – used by young pilots as toys to play with, depict aircraft withdrawn from service, waiting for the axe. One of these original photos is dated May 1950 on its reverse. Those faded photos signal the end of the only four-year-long service of the nimble, sleek, but under-armed, under-powered, unprotected and not quite performing French fighter type in Bulgarian service, which killed more of its own pilots than the number of actual combat 'kills' it could achieve against the enemy.

In closing, let's consider the opinion on the D.520 of a former fighter pilot, Podofitser Anton Borisov Atanasov (called 'Schwarz', i.e. Black, in German): "for a master-pilot, the 'Devoatin' was a fine machine. However, it was capricious, hypersensitive, and reacted immediately to the slightest movement of the hand [on the control column]. It did not tolerate mediocrity. To me, it was a wonderful machine."

The Dual-Control UDv-520

A highly interesting post-war accident report mentions No. 65/7077, belonging to 'Unit 4216-A', as landing on its belly at Telish base, on 22 April 1947, sustaining 40% damage. Light damage occurred also to the Hispano-Suiza 12Y49 engine, No. 592. What is extremely interesting about this incident is

⁵⁵ From 23 August 1945, the aircraft type was officially identified with the OG code, thus still considered.

that the report lists two (!) airmen as being aboard, namely instructor *Poruchik* Georgi M. Georgiev and student pilot *Kandidat podofitser* Marin T. Konakchiev. If the report is accurate – and the Author has no reason to doubt it – it means that the particular D.520, No. 65, was a dual-control machine!⁵⁶ Then, shortly before the closure of the manuscript, another document was found in the Bulgarian military archives (DVIA) of the same accident, which gives, beside the aforementioned details, the aircraft's type: "U.Dv-520" [sic!]. This naming style is consistent with the Soviet-made dual-control aircraft types in Bulgarian service at that time, e.g., UPe-2, UYak-9⁵⁷, or UII-2.

The most plausible explanation could be that (at least) one of the extant D.520s was modified to a dual-control version locally, possibly at the D.S.F. Karlovo Works, where conversion of a few Bf 109Gs into two-seaters [called UMe-109] is known to have taken place [for details, see appropriate chapter]. No further particulars can be told until a photo of a dual-control machine in Bulgarian colours emerges.

As a side note, it is worth mentioning that the neighbouring Rumanians also experimented, and succeeded, with modifying post-war their national fighter type, the I.A.R. 80, into a two-seater (called I.A.R. 80DC), in 1950-1951. This was done for the very same reasons, i.e., lack of a dual-control version. It is unknown if the two Communist allies had any contact and experience sharing in this regard.

Colours and Markings

The camouflage colours worn by the Dewoitine D.520s in Bulgarian service is one of the great mysteries surrounding the topic. The Author has consulted hundreds of documents from the Bulgarian military archives and dozens of photos of the aircraft type, and came up with a firm conclusion, based on these sources, combined with educated guess: the D.520s were painted in the standard *Luftwaffe* daylight fighter camouflage grey/blue colours of RLM 74/75/76 (details below).

The only original document found by the Author refers to one of the colours worn by D.520s. It is a list with all Bulgarian warplanes operating over the German-Bulgarian front zone in Macedonia in the autumn of 1944, intended for ground troops and probably anti-aircraft artillery crews. The document, dated 28 October 1944, lists the 'Devoatin-520' with 'light blue' colour (most probably on the undersurfaces), "identical to the 'Me-109 Strela'". This pretty much clarifies the colour worn on the lower surfaces, but leaves the crucial topic of the colours applied on the upper surfaces open.

Based solely on many period photographs, and taking into consideration the origins of the aircraft in German-controlled France, the Author came to the following conclusion: on arrival, the newly-manufactured D.520s wore typical *Luftwaffe* camouflage colours, consisting of greenish dark grey (RLM 74) and mid-grey (RLM 75) on the upper surfaces and light blue (RLM 76) on the undersurfaces.

Late edit. After the manuscript had been closed and all artwork completed based on the Author's 'educated guess', formed by analysing black/white photos and history-based logic, a German technical document detailing the conditions of the D.520 handover to the Bulgarians, as well as all accessories and spare parts, has surfaced (see page 218). The first sentence reads, as follows: "1 pc. Dewoitine 520

Spectacular view of White 14 (outlined), taken post-September 1944. Notice the unusual light grey paint on the wing and horizontal stabiliser upper surfaces. Contrary to many previous interpretations of this photo, the light colour on the wingtip is white, just like the mid-fuselage band and spinner, as per the official regulations issued on 20 September 1944. The dark shade paint visible in front of the windshield and on the rudder top, as well as on the inner wing surface, is believed by the Author to be dark green (not dark brown, as it's often suggested).

56 The French did convert about a dozen D.520s to dual-control, called DC, but only post-war, so it's excluded that such trainers were exported to Bulgaria.

57 The Order of Battle of January 1946 does not list the UDv-520 (but lists the UYak-9).





D.520s of 1/6. Orlyak are being prepared for a combat mission against German ground forces in October 1944. The wide white fuselage band and white wingtips denoted pro-Allied aircraft, recognisable from both the ground and from the air. Ironically, however, the white spiral on black spinner – an Axis recognition feature – was kept.





Enlargement from the top picture on the previous page depicts a D.520 wearing white pro-Allies markings (mid-fuselage band and wingtips). The aircraft's individual number is believed to be red, or green 14, outlined in white. Both the main undercarriage and tail tyres were made by Goodrich.

cell with German and French lettering, painting like the Me 109 [underline mine, D.B.] (...)." The underlined detail clearly identifies the camouflage scheme worn by the D.520s as being equivalent to the Bf 109Gs – to the Author's great relief.

When they arrived from France, some of the aircraft had the entire tail surfaces painted in yellow, some only the rudder and the elevators. Most of them had the underside of the engine cowlings, as well as the lower wingtips, also painted in yellow. Despite sporadic claims, the Author has found no photographic evidence that the upper wingtips were also painted yellow. There was no yellow identification colour applied anywhere else on the airframe, thus no yellow mid- or rear fuselage band, as often depicted erroneously by various artists and modellers.

The black swastika was applied on mid-fin, over a light grey diamond shape rectangle. On arrival, there was no light-coloured area on the front fin root. This detail is essential in recognising the Bulgarian-applied camouflage scheme of the D.520. The spinner was either 2/3rd, or 3/4th dark green (RLM 71) and 1/3rd, or 1/4th white (RLM 67), or partially yellow (RLM 04 or 27). It is the standard German camouflage scheme, including *Luftwaffe* markings, the D.520s generally wore in Bulgaria until the end of 1943. Despite various claims, there is no proof that any of the D.520s handed over to the Bulgarians wore French style three-tone camouflage colours (e.g., dark brown, dark green and mid-greyish blue, over light greyish blue). It would not make any sense, as the aircraft were manufactured after the fall of France, under German supervision, and had to fit period German standards for the planned *Luftwaffe* use.

Gradually, the D.520s were partially repainted in Bulgaria on the upper surfaces with one or two shades of dark green colour of unidentified hue, called by the Author 'Bulgarian green'⁵⁸. Occasionally, an unidentified light grey colour, called by the Author 'Bulgarian grey', can also be observed on period photos. It must be emphasised that there are no proofs of any locally sourced specialised aviation paints

Panoramic view of 'Graf Ignatievo' airfield soon after the war's end, in mid-1945, with a miscellany of Bulgarian and Soviet warplanes. One can recognise several Soviet Yak-9 fighters and a sole A-20 Boston bomber, as well as many Bulgarian Ju 87Ds and three KB-11 'Fazans'. Of special interest are the three D.520s, at right: white 15 (closest to the camera), unidentified (probably coloured serial number), and white 10 (farthest). All sport the white pro-Allies fuselage band as most other Bulgarian and Soviet warplanes do (but not all, e.g., the Yak in centre). White 15 appears to have its propeller removed.

58 As noted earlier, the conclusions are solely the Author's. Only period documents, clearly stating the colours, could finally shed light on this mystery. The Author keeps searching for this elusive document in the Bulgarian archives, via proxy research.



Despite the mediocre quality of this much worn and folded print, the depicted D.520, Red 14, is of interest, as the snapshot was taken on 30 March 1945, at Telish airfield. Apparently, the aircraft had been retired, that would explain why the pro-Allies recognition white ID colour wasn't applied, and the pro-Axis yellow was retained (see the lower panel of the engine cowling). The upper part of the cowling shows a different, newer looking paintjob, possibly denoting a replacement part.



Bulgarian airmen and ground personnel pose in front of a D.520 in a pilot training school in 1946. The white roundel of the so-called 'OF-marking' is faintly seen under the wings, at both ends of the photograph.

and lacquers being used, only German ones (for details, see chapter on camouflage and colours in vol. 1). The actual shades of the Bulgarian green colour(s) are unfortunately unknown; however, judged by high quality photographs, it might have resembled the dark green (RLM 71) and black green (RLM 70) shades already used on various German types in service with the VNVV. The 'Bulgarian grey' may have been RLM 02 'RLM-grau'.

The location of the swastika is not seen on photos as overpainted on mid-fin. Instead, the entire tail surface appears to have received a new coat of paint. This further reinforces the Author's theory that the D.520s were repainted in Bulgaria, at least partially, using German paints. One reason why the tail surface was repainted in Bulgaria may have been that it was completely yellow when the aircraft





Bulgarian aviation pioneer and World War 1 veteran Polkovnik (Colonel) Prodan S. Tarakchiev (1885–1957) poses for a memory shot in front of a retired D.520, in 1948. While flying an Albatros F-2 pusher biplane, Tarakchiev and his pilot, the similarly famous Radul M. Milkov (1883–1962), dropped aerial bombs for the second time in an armed conflict, during the First Balkan War, on 16 October 1912. The apertures in the spinner tip for the original Hispano-Suiza HS.404 20 mm cannon, as well as for the four wing-mounted MAC 1934 M39 7.5 mm machine guns, are clearly visible.

arrived. Additionally, as noted earlier, strangely, a light colour (most probably grey) was applied on the fin root, or mid-fin, in an irregular shape. This detail is a good indication when looking at photographs if a particular D.520 wore new paint job, or original German one. On some airplanes the upper wingtips and horizontal stabilisers also wore this very light grey colour, 'Bulgarian grey' (similarly to at least one Bf 109G-6, Red 7, topic of a two-view colour profile, see pages 136-137).

The propeller spinner was initially left 2/3rd dark green and 1/3rd white, although some Dewoitines had the spinner painted in yellow and white, as noted earlier. Gradually, the segmented spinner was repainted in a bright colour (possibly red), but only for a short time. Based on veteran airmen's memoirs, Dewoitines of 2/6. *Orlyak* had their spinner painted in the so-called *yato* (squadron) colour. Several D.520s had their spinners painted uniform dark green. This, and the aforementioned red colour could be interpreted as proof of the previous statement. At one point in early 1944 – much later than on Bf 109Gs – the propeller spinner was painted black, with a white spiral applied over it, identifying the aircraft from the front as part of the Axis, and also drew the attention of ground personnel to a rotating propeller. Ironically, for a while this Axis identification was kept even after the Bulgarian about-face of early September 1944. Most of those Dewoitines belonging to the 1/6. *Orlyak* that were committed to front service against the Germans were supposed to have their propeller spinners painted in white, as per the regulation introduced on 19 September (see details of this order in the preceding pages), although exceptions occurred, as mentioned.

The tips of the wing undersurfaces and the engine cowling underside were usually painted yellow. The rudder and elevators were also occasionally painted yellow. No other usage of yellow on the Dewoitines was observed by the Author, except for the occasional spinner. Therefore, any artwork depicting Bulgarian D.520s with wide yellow mid-fuselage band and upper wingtips is erroneous (all these were, in fact, white).

Obviously, there were exceptions to the camouflage pattern worn by Bulgarian D.520s. A photo taken post-September 1944 (see page 217) shows in the background a strangely painted Dewoitine, sporting what appears to be a dark green basecoat colour with elongated light grey squiggles all over the fuselage and tail section. The wide white mid-fuselage band is also visible. On a close-up photo of another Dewoitine, the fuselage appears to be fairly dark, most probably dark green, with light mottles, but no squiggles, sprayed all over on the upper surfaces. Others were painted only in dark green.

Former prominent fighter pilot, Lt. Asen Kovachev, commanding officer of 662. *Yato*, 2/6. *Orlyak*, recalled in the 1990s⁵⁹ the colours his aircraft, Red 1, wore. He remembers the upper surfaces of the airframe as uniform dark green, with light grey mottles sprayed along the fuselage sides. Unfortunately,



59 As interpreted and depicted by profile artist Petko Mandzhukov.

Although of mediocre quality, this post-war shot of a retired D.520 shows, on the top of the tail surface, a bit of the very light grey colour mottles/squiggles applied from late 1945 on (see, as sample, the Bf 109E wearing the so-called OF marking). One of the young men seen on the photo is Ivan Arnaudov, a radio technician student at that time, who generously offered this photo for publication, via Todor Popov. Photo taken on 1 May 1951.



when asked on 5 February 2014, Mr. Todor "Tedi" Vălkov, son of the commander of the 6th Fighter Regiment, *Polkovnik Vălkov* (up to 13 Sept. 1944), who had seen the D.520s many times in his youth and even photographed them on their arrival (see his photos included in the book), could not recall any more the colours they wore. Former radio technician in the air force, Ivan Arnaudov, at the time of writing these words 85 years old, remembers that the Dewoitine used as a teaching aid after the war was "grey (dusty grey), with dark green mottles". That description would fit the camouflage pattern applied to the fuselage sides, but does not solve the issue of the colours used on the upper surfaces.

The markings worn by Bulgarian Dewoitines were straightforward. Soon after arrival in Bulgaria, *Luftwaffe* markings and codes were replaced by standard Bulgarian ones. The 'St. Andrew's Cross' type marking was applied in six positions (both wing surfaces and rear fuselage sides). The typical triangle appeared on the mid-fin, approximately where the swastika used to be, in white over camouflage colour.

Once in Bulgarian service and properly identified, the Dewoitines received coloured individual (board) numbers (white, green, red), in the range from 1 to 16, or yellow (from 1 to 6), either outlined, or not, depending on which *yato* they belonged to. These serial numbers were applied aft of the fuselage

In lieu of a photo of the domestically modified two-seat UDv-520 that hasn't surfaced until now, here is an also rare photo of a French-made dual-control D.520DC (DC=double commande), also modified after the war. (via Jacques Moulin)





marking. Contrary to the Messerschmitt Bf 109s, and many other VNVV warplane types, the aircraft's individual number was not repeated on the wing undersurfaces.

The *assumed* initial distribution⁶⁰ of identification colours of the Dewoitines' serial (board) numbers among *yata* – as deduced by the Author – was, as follows:

- *Shtab* (1/6. *Orlyak*)=Yellow
- 612. *Yato* (1/6. *Orlyak*)=White
- 622. *Yato* (1/6. *Orlyak*)=Green
- 632. *Yato* (1/6. *Orlyak*)=Red
- *Shtab* (2/6. *Orlyak*)=Yellow (outlined)
- 642. *Yato* (2/6. *Orlyak*)=White (outlined)
- 652. *Yato* (2/6. *Orlyak*)=Green (outlined)
- 662. *Yato* (2/6. *Orlyak*)=Red (outlined)

It has to be highlighted that this list is in contradiction to the system described in the Bf 109G chapter as particular to aircraft of 2/6. *Orlyak*; however, it's plausible that different systems were valid for different types of fighter aircraft. No numbering system could be established for 4/6. *Orlyak*.

To distinguish between different *yata* using the same colour individual numbers, based on photographic evidence, the numbers used by a particular group (*orlyak*) were outlined. For example, the aircraft flown by *Podporuchik* Hristo I. Petrov of 652. *Yato*, part of 2/6. *Orlyak*, D.520, 61/7077, was 'Green 4', outlined in white. One could speculate that the colour of the fuselage number's thin outline (possibly white, green, or red) may have been linked to a certain *orlyak*, but there is no proof of this theory.

The *yato* numbering of the short-lived 4/6. *Orlyak* initially was a mystery, as theoretically the squadrons should have been named 6102, 6112 and 6122, which would be one digit longer than the usual format. The mystery was cleared when a VNVV document summing up the men available to 1/6. and 4/6. *Orlyatsi*, between January and April 1944, surfaced. In it, 1/6. *Orlyak* is listed with 622. and 632. *Yato* (along with 1. *Orl. Rota*), while 4/6. *Orlyak* is listed with 712. and 722. *Yato* (along with 4. *Orl.*

Another post-war photo of a Dewoitine, possibly showing the same machine depicted in the previous shot.

⁶⁰ This colour system was valid only until 2/6. *Orlyak* switched completely to the Bf 109G and 4/6. *Orlyak* was disbanded in the summer of 1944. From that point on, all surviving operational D.520s were assigned to a single fighter group: 1/6. *Orlyak*, with a motley of serial numbers.



The most interesting detail of these front views of a battered Dewoitine fighter is the date written on the rear side of both prints: July 1951! This was well into the Communist era; however, there is little chance the retired aircraft actually wore the Red star style military marking. Most probably, this is the very last time this nimble French fighter type was photographed anywhere in the world (except for museum exhibits).





New technology, new allies. Bulgarian and Soviet pilots pose in front of a recently delivered Yak-9 fighter aircraft, during the transition training to the new Soviet type on Balchik airfield, sometime in 1945. Thanks to veteran pilot Barev, we could identify most of the depicted people. Standing, from left to right: Poruchik Mihail Grigorov, two Russians, unidentified, standing in middle, underneath of the spinner is C/O Mahyor Krăstyu Atanasov (Podpolkovnik from 9 September 1945), another Russian, Radev (returned from the USSR), a Russian mechanic, a Bulgarian mechanic and another Russian. Crouching, from left to right: Podporuchik Anton Barev, Kolev, Shoroplov, Podofitser Anton Atanasov (called 'Schwarz'), technical officer Benev, technical officer Karakonovski. Leaning on the nose of the Yak is Kapitan Rusi Rusev. The silhouette of a Bf 109 is seen in the background. By then, the German technology, as well as the French one, was already passé, replaced by the new – not necessarily superior – Soviet technology. Notice the freshly applied white writing on the hangar door, at left, spelling 'Strogo Zapreshchaetsya'. It is apparently in Russian, and probably means: '[something, like smoking, or entrance, or taking photos] strictly forbidden'.

Rota)⁶¹. The colouring of its *yata*'s individual numbers was most probably identical to the pattern described above, perhaps the colour of the serial number's outline varied.

Only circumstantial proofs (documents and matching photos) regarding the link between units and numbering style and colours are the ones taken from post-accident reports and the attached black&white photos (thus the actual colours are determined by educated guess only), as follows:

- Green 4, white outline (No. 822, 61/7077)=652. *Yato*
- Yellow 2, white outline (No. 856, 89/7077)=Staff 2/6. *Orlyak*
- Red 15, uncertain if outlined in a dark colour or not (No. 853, 87/7077)=662. *Yato*

61 Officially, the first digit was identical to the *polk* number; however, there was no 7th *Polk* in VNVV!

Jagdflugzeug D3: OITINS 520 komplett ausgerüstet mit Zubehör, durch deutsche BAL abgenommen, fabrikmäßig, bestehend aus:

1 Zelle D3: OITINS 520 mit deutscher und franz. Beschriftung, Anstrich wie Me 109 ohne Höhenabzeichen und umgebaut auf deutsches Gasgestänge

Proof that the D.520s shipped to Bulgaria were painted like the Bf 109. The German text reads: "Jagdflugzeug komplett ausgerüstet mit Zubehör, durch deutsche BAL abgenommen, fabrikmäßig, bestehend aus: Zelle mit deutscher und französischer Beschriftung, Anstrich wie Me 109 [underline mine, D.B.], ohne Höhenabzeichen und umgebaut auf deutsches Gasgestänge." The underlined text can be translated as: 'painting like Me 109'. See annex for the complete text of the document.

This detail photo of a Junkers Ju 87D Stuka (erroneously identified by others as a Dewoitine D.520), taken in late 1944, reveals a crucial detail regarding the camouflage scheme also worn by D.520s late in the war. It can be clearly seen that the original factory camouflage colours (faded) were overpainted in places, where they chipped/worn off the most, with a dark colour paint. The last three letters of the stencilled German warning text NICHT BETRETEN ('do not step on') were clearly overpainted by this new coat of paint. The Author believes this Bulgarian add-on paint was dark green. If this assumption is correct, it explains why a dark colour is visible on some late war Dewoitine D.520s, which does not match the original German grey camouflage colours.



Rarely, unit commanders had their own markings, similar to the ones worn by *Luftwaffe* fighters. One such documented case is the topic of a colour profile (see page 230). The rudder of a few D.520s was apparently white, instead of the more common yellow. Otherwise, lower wingtips and engine cowling displayed the pro-Axis yellow on these Dewoitines. The meaning of this distinct rudder colour is not yet understood (for an example of white rudder being used by a D.520, see colour profile on page 229).

A seemingly unimportant detail photo of a Junkers Ju 87D Stuka (erroneously identified by others as a Dewoitine D.520), taken in late 1944, see above, reveals a crucial detail regarding the camouflage scheme of Bulgarian warplanes supplied by the Germans (the D.520 included), in the conditions existing late in the war. It can be clearly seen that the original factory camouflage colours were overpainted in places, where they were chipped/worn off the most, with a dark colour. The Author believes this Bulgarian add-on paint was dark green, the so-called 'Bulgarian green'. If this assumption is correct, it explains why a dark colour is visible on some late war Dewoitine D.520s, which does not match the original German grey camouflage.

The Dewoitine 520 soldiered on long enough to receive the so-called 'OF-type' marking, introduced in early October 1945. However, by then, the type was withdrawn from frontline service and relegated to training duty; therefore, any photo showing a D.520 with this type of markings was clearly taken at a training unit. Surviving aircraft were repainted in uniform dark green of unknown hue on the upper surfaces, usually with light grey squiggles applied all over. The undersurfaces stayed light blue. The aviation paints used post war were most probably of Soviet origin. As per the period standard, the Bulgarian tricolour appeared across the tail surface, as thin horizontal bands. The individual serial number applied on rear fuselage, in front of the military marking, became white, without any outline.

Ironically, at least one such post-war trainer still wore white spiral on black spinner, identifying it as an Axis aircraft, long after it had been removed from service during the Communist times, seen in July 1951, waiting for the scrapper's axe.

Rarely seen 1/6. Orlyak D.520s, parked on the snowy ground of Marno Pole airfield, in early 1944.





This photograph, taken during the winter of 1944/1945, was intended to depict a Focke-Wulf Fw 44J 'Vrabche' schoolplane, coded LZ-FEN (39/7021), in post-September 1944 white ID markings. However, of particular interest is the Dewoitine D.520 seen in the background, at left. It is painted in a peculiar camouflage scheme, most probably consisting of elongated light grey squiggles sprayed over the dark green basecoat colour. The wide mid-fuselage band can be seen under the fuselage spine antenna mast. Unfortunately, the tail surface of the Fw 44 obscures the D.520's fuselage number, if there was any. The Author did not endeavour to attempt reconstructing the camouflage scheme based on this poor-quality detail photo.

This view taken in late 1944 allows the onlooker to study the late-war camouflage pattern applied to the fuselage side and to the rarely seen upper wing surface.



Annexes

Annex 1

Report No. A-23859 of 30 March 1944, on the arrival and test results of Dewoitine D.520 fighters in Bulgaria (as forwarded to the USA Office of Strategic Services, OSS, based on military intelligence confidential files originating from the US Embassy in Turkey, dated 15 January 1944)

"1. According to the correspondent, 100 Dewoitine 520 fighter planes were delivered by the Germans to the Bulgarian Air Force. Their trial flights are nearing completion. These planes are new, equipped with Hispano 12Y45 [sic! actually, 49] engines and armed with four machine guns and a cannon on an axis with the crank shaft of the motor. The armament is excellent and does not get jammed (to which the natives do not seem to be accustomed, to judge by the intonation of the correspondent.) Their speed is not very great around 500 kilometers [per hour], from the point of view of maneuverability, however they outdo most modern German fighter planes.

2. The first planes tested by the Bulgarian pilots were not satisfactory; accidents were frequent and were attributed to defective material. Source has the impression from what the correspondent said, that it was simply the personnel who were not used to handle such planes.

3. In fact, several of these planes have just been displayed by a French pilot called Vion [?], an excellent acrobat, who has surprised the Bulgarians and the Germans with the perfect discipline of the engines during the flight and their obedience to controls.

4. The planes are still at Karlovo where the Bulgarian pilots are learning to "keep them under control" [sic!].

5. The arms and ammunition are said to have been delivered in good condition and large quantities. On the other hand, the situation is much less favorable as to the spare parts for those planes. The delivered parts are different, and this is somewhat worrying the new owners of the 100 Dewoitines.

6. The correspondent states, furthermore, that the French personnel, pilots, mechanics, radio operators, have been extremely well received by the Bulgarian aviators and have returned to France with the very best impressions of that country. The Bulgarian aviators were opposed particularly to letting the French pay for anything (such as hotels, food, drinks, etc.)"

Annex 2

Proposal for the delivery of 100 Dewoitine 520 fighters for Bulgaria, with technical equipment and spare parts, weapons and ammunition, ground and control apparatus (dated around July 1943)

Aircraft with accessories

Dewoitine 520 fighter aircraft, fully equipped with accessories, accepted by German BAL, factory fresh [*fabrikneu*], consisting of:

1 pc. Dewoitine 520 airframe with German and French lettering, painting like Me 109, without national markings and converted to German throttle linkage.

1 pc. Hispano-Suiza 12Y 49 engine.

1 pc. three-blade, all-metal, variable-pitch propeller, Chauvière type 10105A.

1 pc. motor cannon HS 404, 20 mm [calibre], with ammunition container and 60-shot drums.

4 pcs. machine guns 7.5 mm [calibre] Model 1937 M 39 [actually, MAC-34 M39], with belt feed.

1 pc. OPL/R X 39 [actually, OPL RX 39 type] reflector gunsight (*Viseur Collimateur Fixe*).

1 pc. on-board radio system *Radio-Industrie* [RI] 537.

1 pc. on-board fire extinguishing system Lévy G4.

1 pc. suitcase with high-altitude breathing apparatus [oxygen mask].

1 pc. each tailored cover for canopy, engine and pitot tube.

1 pc. set of special tools 1st class (airborne equipment bag).

1 pc. each German-language operation manual, airframe and engine logbooks, and flight log.

1 pc. back parachute [type] Lemer cier 552, converted to German security standards.

Spare parts inventory

A, Airframe

First spare parts set for units and repair, see Appendix 1 [not published].

B, Engine

50 pcs. Hispano-Suiza 12Y 49 engine, factory fresh [*fabrikneu*], packed in crates.
1 unit's stockpile, calculated for 100 engines, see Appendix 2 [not published].
10 Partial overhaul sets, calculated for 1 engine, see Appendix 2 [not published].

C, Weapons

45 pcs. motor cannon, [type] Hispano-Suiza 404.
12 sets of spare parts, breakdown see Appendix 3 [not published].
180 pcs. MG MAC 34/39.
24 sets of spare parts, breakdown see Appendix 4 [not published].
90 pcs. 60-shot drums.
12 pcs. reflector gunsights [*Reflexvisier*] RX 39
12 pcs. photo gun cameras (2 pcs./type)

Ground and Repair Shop Equipment

(...)



<http://mmpbooks.biz/assets/BFC/2-03.pdf>

Annex 3

Construction numbers of D.520s selected for the Bulgarian air force (status as of 25.09.1943)

Known French construction numbers of all D.520s that actually took off towards Bulgaria are, as follows: 722, 724, 741-747, 750, 752-755, 757-759, 761, 763, 765, 767, 769-772, 774-779, 781-790, 792-797, 799-811, 813-814, 816-819, 822-858. In total, 103 aircraft. Of these, c/n 839 was a total write-off, destroyed 100%, while it hit a steel wire of a ferry boat near Efferdingen (?) [perhaps Eferding, or Echterdingen], c/n 811 force landed 2 km south of Lyon due to fuel starvation (20%), c/n 834 force landed near Mende due to engine trouble (50%), c/n 784 suffered minor damage during taxiing on Lyon airfield (10%), c/n 810 force landed 1 km south-east of Strubing because of “*K-mangel* (defect)” (70%), c/n 792 force landed 10 km west of Nîmes, pilot lost orientation (40%) [previously damaged 15% at Villacoublay on 6.08, while in service with JG 105], c/n 831 and 837 somersaulted on Freiburg airfield (both 60%), c/n 827 crashed while landing on Wiener Neustadt airfield (30%) [previously with GC ‘Doret’ as No. 4, then with GCB II/18] and c/n 854 crashed by Nish (35%). Additional incidents (without the extent of damage being given): c/n 794 suffered a main undercarriage failure at Göppingen, c/ns 741 and 755 are grounded at Wels due to propeller change, and c/n 750 experienced engine trouble and landed near Böblingen. [Note: c/n 746 served with JG 107 prior to be shipped to Bulgaria].

Based on the quoted document, a total of 89 aircraft actually reached Bulgaria by the time of the document's release. A further 13 needed repair (detailed above). Total is 103, but only if all listed D.520s were eventually shipped to Bulgaria [which is doubtful, as one crashed and was destroyed, a three more were damaged 60% and 70%. D.B.]. At the end, 100 D.520s entered in VNVV service.

Annex 4

List of D.520 pilots' air victory claims and awarded points – compiled by Dénes Bernád

| Last, First, Middle Name | Rank | Unit (<i>Orlyak</i>) | Date of Victory Claim | Victory Claim, Destroyed | Victory Claim, Damaged | Victory Points | Notes |
|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------|--|
| Kovachev, Asen D. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Pavlov, Pavel I. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 2/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | ‘Fortress’ | 0 | Listed in 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> combat diary. NIOVL KIA |
| Pavlov, Viktor E. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.12.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | NIOVL |
| Marinopolski, Stefan N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 20.12.1943 | B-24 | - | 3 | |
| Bonchev, Nedélcho D. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 20.12.1943 | - | B-24 | 2 | |
| Pavlov, Viktor E. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 20.12.1943 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Nachev, Nikola N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 20.12.1943 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Atanasov, Georgi N. | <i>Podofitser</i> | 2/6 | 20.12.1943 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Iliev, Bogdan Y. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 1/6 | 20.12.1943 | - | B-24 | 0 | NIOVL |
| Kovachev, Asen D. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 20.12.1943 | - | P-38 | 0 | NIOVL |
| Bächvarov, Dimităr A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 1/6 | 4.01.1944* | Four-engine bomber | - | 3 | Flying alone, no witnesses (still officially confirmed). *Some published sources give the date as 10 January |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|-------------------------|-----|------------|------------|--------------------|-----|--|
| Dimitrov, Zemen T. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | B-17 | - | 3 | |
| Gochev, Georgi H. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | B-17 | - | 3 | |
| Bălgaranov, Emil P. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | B-17 | - | 3 | |
| Ivanov, Ivan T. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | B-17 | - | 3 | |
| Shishkov, Vasil L. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 1/6 | 10.01.1944 | 'Stirling' | - | 2 | Reference to the British Short Stirling bomber, misidentification of the B-17 |
| Iliev, Stefan T. | <i>Kandidat ofitser</i> | 1/6 | 10.01.1944 | | - | 1 | |
| Stoitsev, Emil G. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | B-17+P-38 | 2+0 | |
| Aleksandrov, Vladimir A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | 2 x B-17 | 2+0 | |
| Vălchev, Ivan T. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | B-17 | 0 | NIOVL |
| Kovachev, Asen D. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Nachev, Nikola N. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Kraevski, Panyu A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Petrov, Petăr K. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 10.01.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Iliev, Bogdan Y. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 1/6 | 30.03.1944 | P-38 | - | 1 | Hit in combat |
| Shishkov, Vasil P. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 1/6 | 30.03.1944 | P-38 | - | 1 | |
| Kovachev, Asen D. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 2/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Aleksandrov, Vladimir A. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | |
| Matev, Atanas A. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 2/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | P-38 | 0 | Last name erroneously spelled Mateev |
| Stoitsev, Emil G. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | 'Fortress'* | 1 | Shared victory. *Combat diary of 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> identifies the type as 'Lightning', one for each pilot (wrong) |
| Gigov, Asen P. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 30.03.1944 | - | | 1 | |
| Petrov, Petăr K. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 2/6 | 4.04.1944 | B-24 | B-24 | 3+2 | Highest scoring D.520 pilot (based on victory points) |
| Kolev, Nikola R. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 4/6 | 5.05.1944 | - | Four-engine bomber | 2 | |
| Petrov, Marin G. | <i>Kapitan</i> | 4/6 | 5.05.1944 | - | Four-engine bomber | 1 | |
| Planinski, Zahari I. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | 4/6 | 5.05.1944 | - | bomber | 1 | |
| Iliev, Bogdan Y. | <i>Poruchik</i> | 1/6 | 24.06.1944 | - | B-24 | 0 | NIOVL |
| Yankov, Yanko P. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | 1/6 | 24.06.1944 | - | | 0 | NIOVL |
| Total aircraft claimed (victory points given) | | | | 13 | 8 | 45 | |

Note: NIOVL means Not Included in the Official Victory List; KIA means Killed In Action

Annex 5

List of individual aircraft losses, accidents and write-offs – compiled by Dénes Bernád

| S/N | C/N | Codes | Photo | Unit/Date | Damaged | Destroyed | WFU | Notes |
|-----|-----|-------|-------|-----------|----------------------------------|-----------|------------|--|
| 1 | | | | | | | 20.08.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 171 |
| 2 | | | | | | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 3 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 4 | | | | | | | 18.02.1947 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 5 | | | | | | | | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 6 | | | | | 19.05.1945 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 7 | | | | | | | | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 8 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 9 | | | | | | | 13.06.1946 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 10 | | | | | | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 11 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 252 |
| 12 | | | | | | | 18.02.1947 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|--|----------|-----|---------------------------------|------------|--------------------------|---|
| 13 | | | | | | 31.08.1945 | |
| 14 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 15 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 16 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 17 | | | | | | 23.05.1947 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945. Engine HS-12Y49 No. 185 |
| 18 | | | | | | 28.06.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 538. Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 (contradiction with the write-off date) |
| 19 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 20 | | | | | | 28.06.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 770 |
| 21 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 363 |
| 22 | | | | | | 28.06.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 767 |
| 23 | | | | | | 17.09.1945 | |
| 24 | | | | | 18.11.1944 | 20.11.1944 | Last combat loss. <i>Ppor.</i> Zlati Tilev bailed out. Engine HS-12Y49 No. 229 |
| 25 | | | | | | 17.09.1945 | |
| 26 | | | | | | 20.08.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 186 |
| 27 | | | | | | 17.09.1945 | |
| 28 | | | | | | | |
| 29 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 30 | | | | | | 31.08.1945 | Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Asen Gigov on 20 and 21.01.1944, and on 17.02.1944 |
| 31 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Asen Gigov on 4 and 9.02.1944 |
| 32 | | | | 1.06.1945 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | | | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 33 | | | | | | 20.02.1945 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 238 |
| 34 | | | | | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 35 | | | | | | 13.06.1946 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 36 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 37 | | | | | | | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 38 | | White 14 | Yes | | | | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 39 | | | | | 12.06.1944 | 1.08.1944, 22.02.1946 | Destroyed during RAF bombing of Karlovo airfield |
| 40 | | | | | | 20.08.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 295 |
| 41 | | | | | | | Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Asen Gigov on 8.02.1944. Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 42 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 43 | | | | | | 17.01.1945 28.12.1945 | |
| 44 | | | | | | 17.09.1945 | |
| 45 | | | | | 12.06.1944 | 1.08.1944 | Destroyed during RAF bombing of Karlovo airfield |
| 46 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 47 | | | | | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 48 | | | | | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 49 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 50 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 51 | | | | | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----|---------|-----|--|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|---|
| 52 | 807 | NT+QE | Yes | | 13.10.1943 642. <i>Yato</i> | | 20.08.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 276. |
| 53 | | | | | | | | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 54 | | | | | | | 13.06.1946 | |
| 55 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 56 | | | Yes | | | | 28.12.1945 | Photo with wide, white mid-fuselage band. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 57 | | | | | | 28.09.1944 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 8.10.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 566. <i>Podof.</i> Asen Petkov shot down by flak over Shtip, crashed in Greece. |
| 58 | | | | | | | | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 59 | | | | | | 10.12.1943 652. <i>Yato</i> | 27.05.1946 | Assigned to 652. <i>Yato</i> , 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> . Destroyed in air combat (<i>Kpt.</i> Pavel Pavlov killed) |
| 60 | 819 | | | | | 21.10.1943 652. <i>Yato</i> | | Destroyed in accident |
| 61 | 822 | Green 4 | Yes | | 20.12.1943 652. <i>Yato</i> | | | Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Marinopolski on 21.10.1943. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 62 | | | | | | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 63 | | | | | | | 13.06.1946 | Extant with 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> on 27.07.1945 |
| 64 | 825 | | | | 11.01.1944 652. <i>Yato</i> | | 12.06.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 301. Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Marinopolski in Nov. 1943 (incl. in air combat) |
| 65 | | | | | 22.04.1947 Unit 4216-A | | | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 592. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945. Damaged following a belly landing at Telish airfield on 22.04.1947, with a crew of two! (dual-command aircraft!). Type given as "U.Dv-520". Not repaired, scrapped |
| 66 | | | | | 31.10.1944 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | | 18.02.1947 | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Konstantin T. Konstantinov. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 67 | 829 | NU+BQ | Yes | | 12.10.1943 652. <i>Yato</i> | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 68 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 69 | | | | | 9.06.1945 | | 25.04.1946 | Accident <i>Por.</i> Kostadin Kostadinov on 9.06.1945. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 70 | | | | | 31.10.1944 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | | 4.09.1945 | Flown by <i>Feldfebel</i> Yanko P. Yankov. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 71 | | | | | | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 72 | 836 | NU+BR | | | 4.10.1943 642. <i>Yato</i> | | 20.01.1944 | Belly landed by <i>Por.</i> Ivan P. Vătov |
| 73 | | | | | | | 26.11.1945 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 74 | 840 | | | | | 2.11.1943. 662. <i>Yato</i> | 28.12.1943 | First aircraft officially written off, on 28.12.1943. Engine HS-12Y49 No. 318, propeller 'Shofir' (i.e., Chauvière) type 10105A, radio station R.I.537. Airframe C/N given also as 814, in the write-off protocol |
| 75 | 841 | NU+BV | Yes | | 12.11.1943 662. <i>Yato</i> | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 76 | | | | | | | 18.02.1947 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 77 | | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 78 | | | | | | | | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 79 | | | | | | | 25.08.1944 | Engine HS-12Y49 No. 438 |

| | | | | | | | |
|-----|-----|----------------------|-----|--|---|------------|--|
| 80 | | | | | | 17.09.1945 | <i>Podof.</i> Dimitâr Stoyanov, flak fire over Kriva Palanka, crashed |
| 81 | | | | | | 17.09.1945 | |
| 82 | | 11 (no colour known) | | | 1.06.1945 | 23.12.1946 | Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Zhelyu Zhelev on 25.04.1944. Accident <i>Ppor.</i> Todor Arnaudov on 1.06.1945. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 83 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 84 | | | | | | 28.05.1947 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945. Engine HS-12Y49 No. 589 |
| 85 | | | | | | 17.09.1945 | |
| 86 | | | | | | 13.06.1946 | |
| 87 | 853 | Red 15 | Yes | | 03.12.1944 662. <i>Yato</i> | 18.02.1947 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 88 | | | | | 26.12.1944 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 26.11.1945 | Accident by <i>Ppor.</i> Rusi Piperov, 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> . Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 89 | 856 | Yellow 2 | Yes | | 4.12.1943 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> Staff | 1.08.1944 | |
| 90 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 91 | | | | | | 6.09.1945 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 92 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 93 | | | | | | 1.08.1944 | |
| 94 | | | | | | 23.12.1946 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 95 | | | | | | 18.02.1947 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 96 | | | | | | 4.09.1945 | Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 97 | | | | | 7.06.1944 School unit Asën | 15.10.1946 | Collision with No. 99, by <i>Ppor.</i> Tacho S. Popov. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 98 | | White 14 | Yes | | | | Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Asen Gigov on 18 and 20.01.1944. Flown by <i>Ppor.</i> Zhelyu Zhelev on 24.04.1944. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 99 | | | | | 7.06.1944 School unit Asën; 8.06.1945 | 4.09.1945 | No. 97 collided with it (minor damage). Accident <i>Podof.</i> Kosyu Stoyanov on 8.06.1945. Extant with the Fighter School on 27.07.1945 |
| 100 | | | Yes | | | 1.08.1944 | Photo inscribed with "Devoitine 100" text |



An anonymous D.520, assigned to the Fighter School of Dolna Mitropoliya, photographed in June 1944.

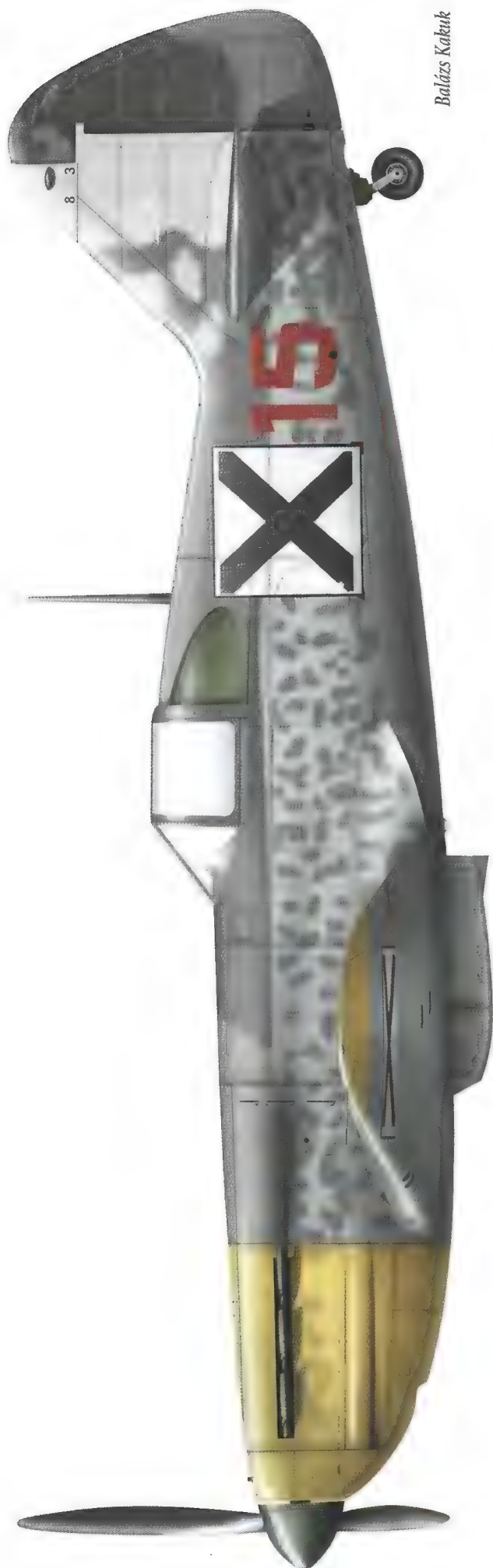


Balázs Kakuk

D.520 C1 (W.Nr. 836), NU+BR & White 2, pilot Poruchik Ivan P. Vătov, 642. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, Marno Pole (Karlovo), 4 October 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Standard Luftwaffe markings, weathered factory Stammkennzeichen on fuselage. White number 2 in centre of the fuselage Balkenkreuz. Weathered Yellow (RLM 27) tail surface. Upper and lower wingtips Yellow (RLM 27). Spinner 1/4 White (RLM 21), 3/4 Yellow (RLM 27). Propeller blades matt black (RLM 22).

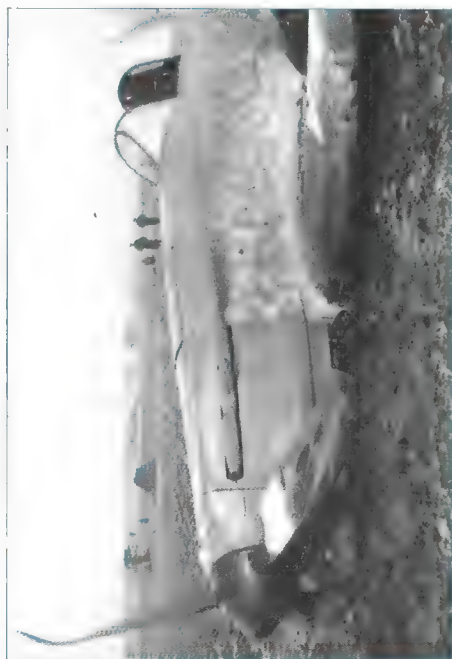
Soon after take-off, the Hispano-Suiza engine of D.520, W.Nr. 836 (NU+BR) quit, forcing the pilot, Poruchik Ivan P. Vătov of 642. Yato, to land his powerless mount with retracted undercarriage at Domlyan, just south-east of Karlovo air base, on 4 October 1943. The aircraft wears standard Luftwaffe camouflage scheme, with weathered factory Stammkennzeichen on the rear fuselage. The tail surface is covered with a weathered, partially chipped off layer of yellow paint. Unusually, there is a white number 2 in centre of the fuselage Balkenkreuz. Also unusually, both the upper and the lower wingtips were identified with a thin yellow band, as opposite to the usual wider yellow band on the lower wingtips only.





Balázs Kakuk

D.520 C1 (W.Nr. 853), NN 87/7077, Red 15, Podofitser Georgi N. Atanasov, 662. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, Sofia, 3 December 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Areas of the fin covered by unidentified Light Grey. Engine cowling wraparound Yellow (RLM 27). Lower wingtips also Yellow (RLM 27). Spinner either Dark Green (RLM 71), but could have been also Red (RLM 23). Propeller blades matt black (RLM 22).



The series of non-combat losses continued in December 1943, too. On the third day of the month, Podofitser Georgi N. Atanasov of 662. Yato had to belly land due to fuel starvation. The almost brand-new aircraft, W.Nr. 853, NN 87/7077, 'Red 15', skidded 110 meters on its belly before it stopped. The pilot was unharmed, and the aircraft could be repaired. The aircraft wears standard Luftwaffe camouflage scheme and typical VNMV markings for that period. Spinner may have been in yato colour, red, just like the board number.



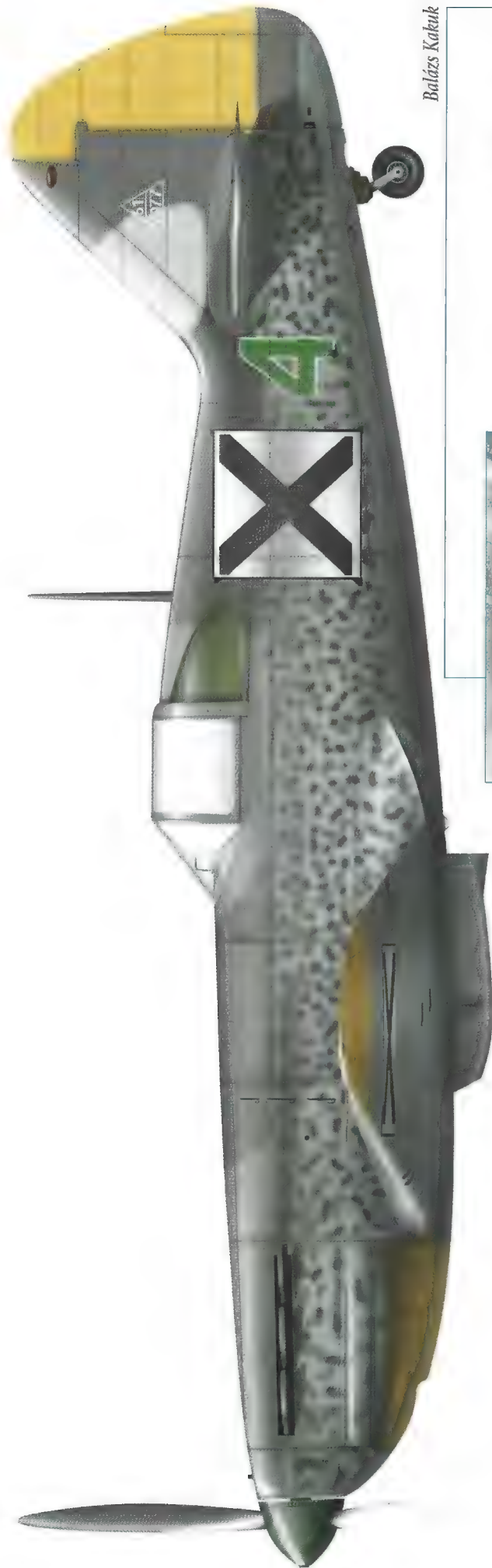


Balázs Kakuk

D.520 C1 (W.Nr. 856), NN 89/7077, Yellow 2 (outlined in White), Poruchik Toma H. Boev, Staff 2/6. Onlyak, Marmio-Pole (Karlovo), 4 December 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74), fuselage sides Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Upper surfaces and fuselage sides covered with dense Black Green (RLM 70) squiggles. Rudder and elevators, engine cowling underside Yellow (RLM 27). Lower wingtips also Yellow (RLM 27). Spinner Dark Green (RLM 71). Propeller blades matt black (RLM 22).

On 4 December 1943, Poruchik Toma Boev of the staff flight of 2/6. Onlyak landed too fast on Karlovo and engaged the brakes too harshly. The D.520, No. 89 (W.Nr. 856), flipped on its back due to the sudden stop. The camouflage scheme worn by this Dewoitine is a peculiar one, not seen on any other depicted Bulgarian D.520. After carefully investigating the post-accident photo, the Author came to the conclusion that the camouflage of 'Yellow 2' most probably consisted of a uniform dark grey colour (RLM 74) on the upper surfaces, while the fuselage sides were covered with a layer of mid-grey (RLM 75). The lower surfaces might have been light blue (RLM 76), or even a lighter shade. Most interestingly, the upper surfaces and fuselage sides were covered with dense squiggles and mottles the Author believes were green (possibly RLM 70). See enlarged photo section for details.



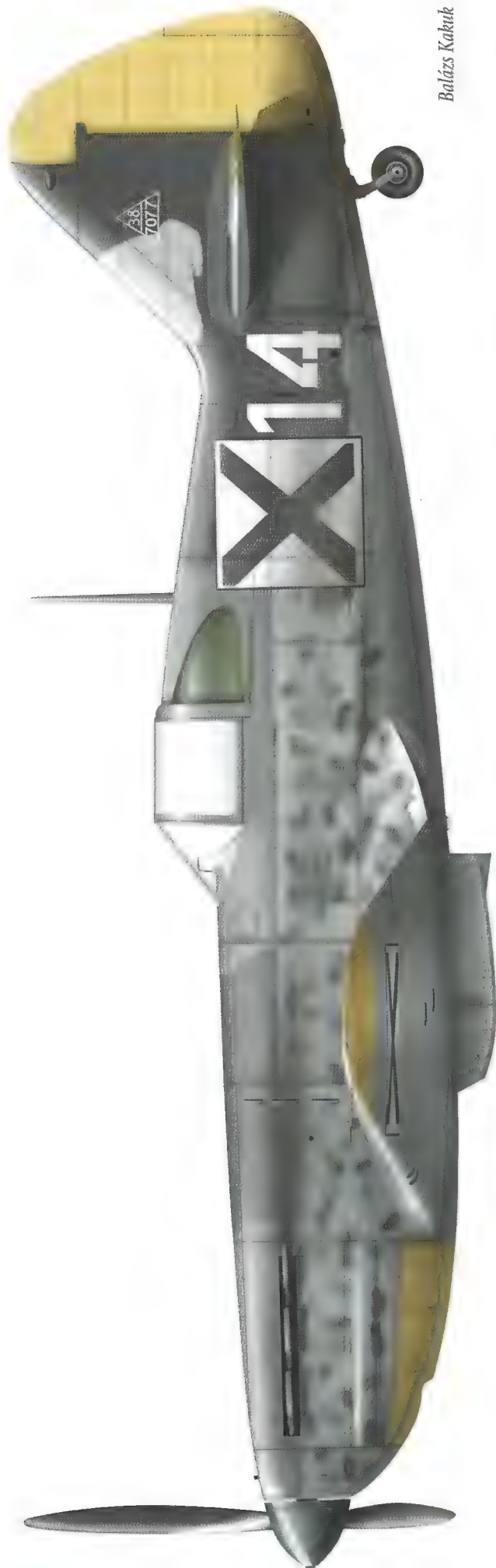


Balázs Kakuk

D.520 C1 (W.Nr. 822), NN 61/7077, Green 4 (outlined in White), Podporuchik Hristo I. Petrov, 652. Yato, 2/6. Ordyak, Sofia, 20 December 1943. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Fuselage sides covered with dense Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75) squiggles and mottles. Areas of the fin covered by unidentified Light Grey. Engine cowling underside Yellow (RLM 27), as was the upper 3/4" of the rudder. Lower wingtips also Yellow (RLM 27). Spinner Dark Green (RLM 71). Propeller blades natural metal.

While rolling on unfamiliar terrain upon returning from the heated air combat of 20 December 1943, Podporuchik Hristo Petrov of 652. Yato pressed the brakes too harshly, and his mount ended up on its nose, in the so-called 'pilot's monument' position. The D.520, NN 61/7077 (W.Nr. 822), 'Green 4', was repaired in a matter of days, and returned to duty, as was his careless pilot. The aircraft wears standard Luftwaffe camouflage scheme and typical VNV markings for that period. The spinner is painted in a dark colour, presumably green, which is of darker hue than the fuselage number. It is impossible to say if this was in connection to the yato colour (mid-green), as depicted by the fuselage number, or was only a pure coincidence.





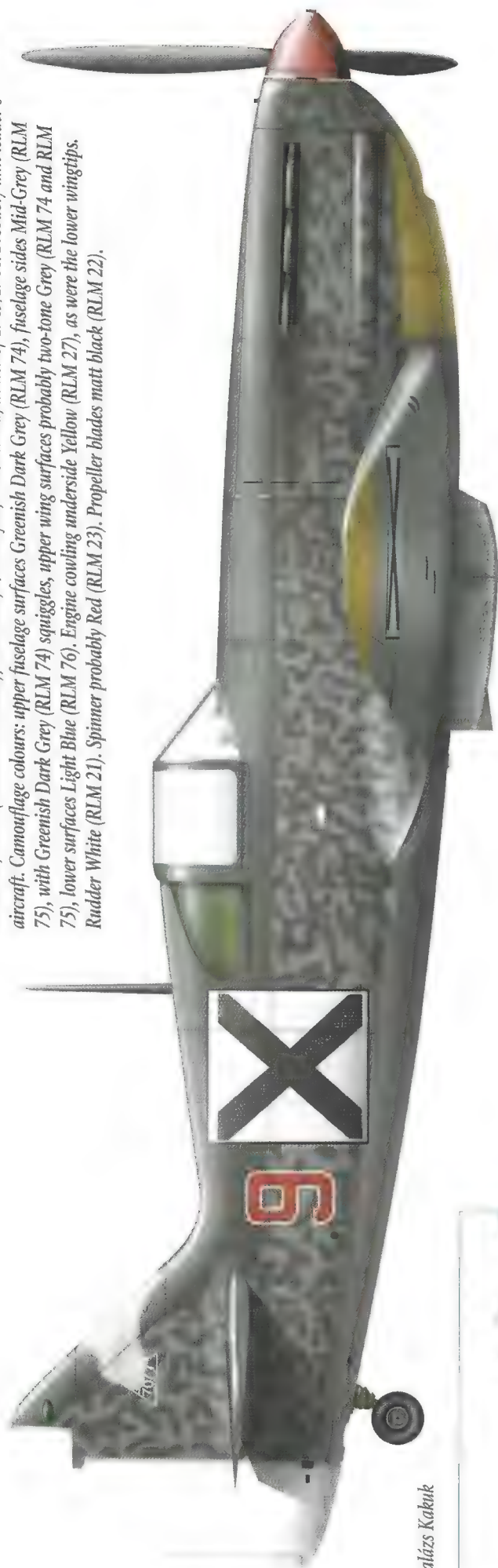
Balázs Kakuk

D.520 C1, NN 38/7077, White 14, 612. Yato, 1/6. Orlyak. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Fuselage sides covered with rare Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75) squiggles. Areas of the fin covered by unidentified Light Grey. Engine cowling underside Yellow (RLM 27), as were the rudder and elevators. Lower wingtips also Yellow (RLM 27). Spinner Dark Green (RLM 71). Propeller blades matt black (RLM 22).



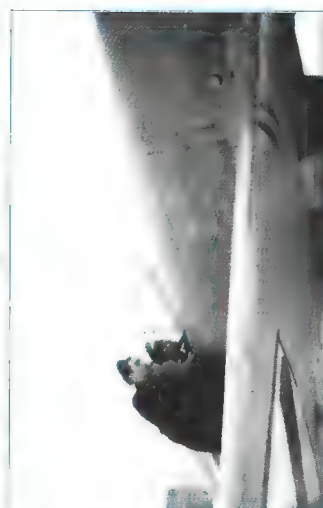
A ground crewman, dressed as a pilot, poses in front of D.520, 'White 14' (no outline), NN 38/7077, during early 1944, for a photo to be sent to family and friends. If the Author's theory on yato colour distribution is correct, this machine belonged to 1/6. Orlyak, 612. Yato. The colour of spinner cannot be established, as it's covered by the person's right arm, but it's presumed dark green.

D.520 C1, Red 9 (outlined in White), 662. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, Vrazhdebna, winter of 1943/1944. Probably unit leader's aircraft. Camouflage colours: upper fuselage surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74), fuselage sides Mid-Grey (RLM 75), with Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) squiggles, upper wing surfaces probably two-tone Grey (RLM 74 and RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Engine cowling underside Yellow (RLM 27), as were the lower wingtips. Rudder White (RLM 21). Spinner probably Red (RLM 23). Propeller blades matt black (RLM 22).

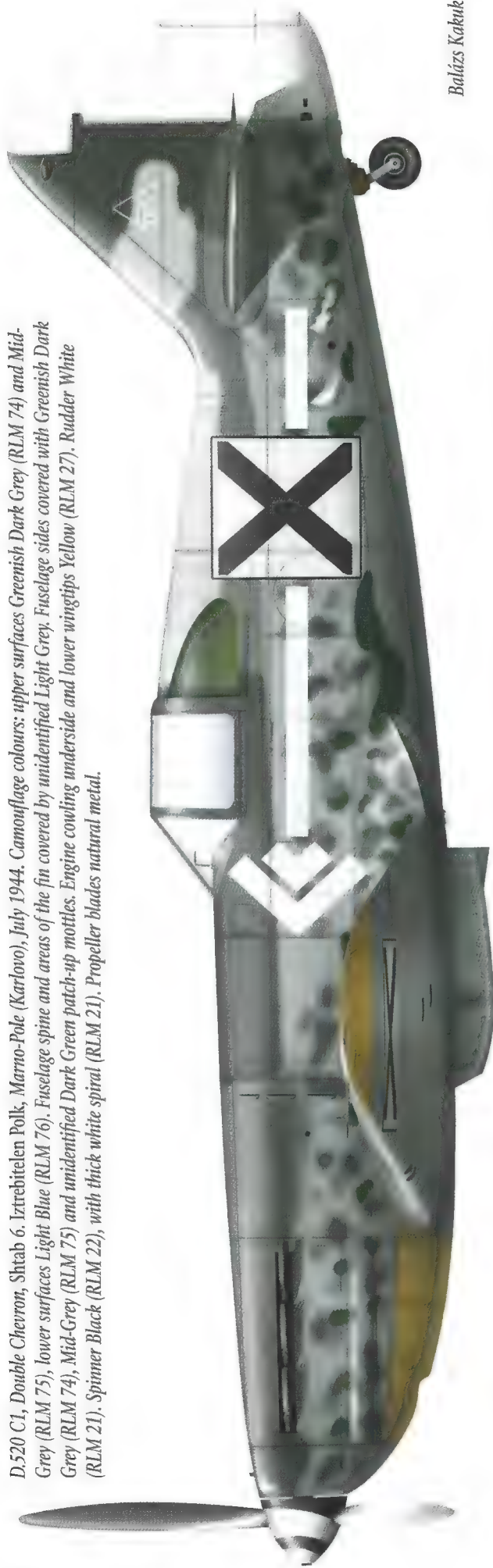


Balázs Kakuk

A series of four photos depicting what is believed to be 'Red 9', outlined in white, parked on the snowy Vrazhdebna airfield during the winter of 1943/1944. Unfortunately, nothing else is known about this set of pictures, except that it was most probably part of 2/6. Orlyak, the photo album's owner, Podporuchik Nikola Nachey, was member of. The owner is believed to be the airman sitting in the cockpit, with a colleague explaining him the secrets of flying the French machine. The spinner appears to be monocolour, possibly red (as described by veteran pilot Asen Kovachev for the Dewoitines of 2/6. Orlyak, used for a brief early period). The rudder seems to be white (if so, it is only the third such known occurrence on VNNV fighters).



D.520 C1, Double Chevron, Shrab 6. Iztrebiteľen Polk, Marno-Pole (Karlovo), July 1944. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Fuselage spine and areas of the fin covered by unidentified Light Grey. Fuselage sides covered with Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74), Mid-Grey (RLM 75) and unidentified Dark Green patch-up mottles. Engine cowling underside and lower wingtips Yellow (RLM 27). Rudder White (RLM 21). Spinner Black (RLM 22), with thick white spiral (RLM 21). Propeller blades natural metal.



Balázs Kakuk

Considerable intrigue surrounds this photo, more precisely the camouflage and markings of the D.520 seen in the background. The camouflage colours are interpreted by several historians and artists as tri-colour French (i.e., brown, green and grey). By contrast, the Author believes the camouflage colours are typical Luftwaffe ones (RLM 74/75/76), while the markedly darker spots visible on fuselage sides and on bottom of the rear fuselage are add-on dark green squiggles and mottles. Additionally, the rear fuselage spine and areas on the fin were painted in unidentified Bulgarian light grey, observed from mid-1944 on. The unique white personal marking along the fuselage is interpreted by some as a simple arrow (the white 'blob' under the cockpit being allegedly a parachute lying on the port wing), while the Author believes it is a large double chevron, also used by certain Luftwaffe fighter commanders (like Major Johannes 'Hannes' Trautloft, commanding officer of JG 54, the so-called 'Grünherz-Geschwader', on his Bf 109G-2, in 1942 – see attached sample photo). One may speculate that the owner of this exotically painted D.520 (not Ppor. Váľkov, as described in most printed sources), possibly one of the three fighter orlyvatsi commanders, might have seen the decorated aircraft of a senior German officer and wanted his aircraft to be adorned in the same manner. Todor 'Tedi' Váľkov – son of the Commander-in-Chief of the 6th Iztrebiteľen Polk (Fighter Regiment), Podpolkovnik (Lientenant-Colonel) Vasil P. Váľkov – recalls four D.520s parked almost always in front of the main administrative building at Karlovo air base, which very rarely flew. Those were assigned to the staff of 2/6. Orlyak. One of them might have been the double chevron machine. In this instance, the rudder is white, otherwise the usual VNV markings for that period are worn.





Balázs Kakuk

D.520 C1, Green 12 (outlined in Red), 652. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak, Marno-Pole (Karlovo), spring 1944. Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Fuselage spine and front area of the fin covered by unidentified Light Grey. Fuselage sides covered with Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74), Mid-Grey (RLM 75) and unidentified Light Grey mottles. Engine cowling underside and lower wingtips Yellow (RLM 27). Spinner Black (RLM 22), with white spiral (RLM 21). Propeller blades matt black (RLM 22).

Bulgarian pilots clown around 'Green 12' (outlined in red), probably in the spring of 1944 (they wear winter uniforms, but no greatcoats). Interestingly, light grey colour mottles were sprayed onto the fuselage side, over the slightly darker colour shade, just the opposite to the scheme seen on other photos. Additionally, the rear fuselage spine and the front area of the fin were also painted in the same shade of unidentified Bulgarian light grey, observed on several Bulgarian fighter aircraft in 1944. Notice the shade of the number's outline is lighter than the black cross, and the number itself is lighter than the outline. This observation led the Author to the conclusion that the number might have been green and the outline red.



D.520 C1, NN 98/7077, White 14 (outlined in Red), 612. Yato (ex-642. Yato), 1/6. Onlyak, Bozhurishite, October 1944.

Camouflage colours: upper surfaces Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) and Mid-Grey (RLM 75), lower surfaces Light Blue (RLM 76). Upper wing and horizontal stabiliser surfaces partially covered by unidentified Dark Green and Light Grey.

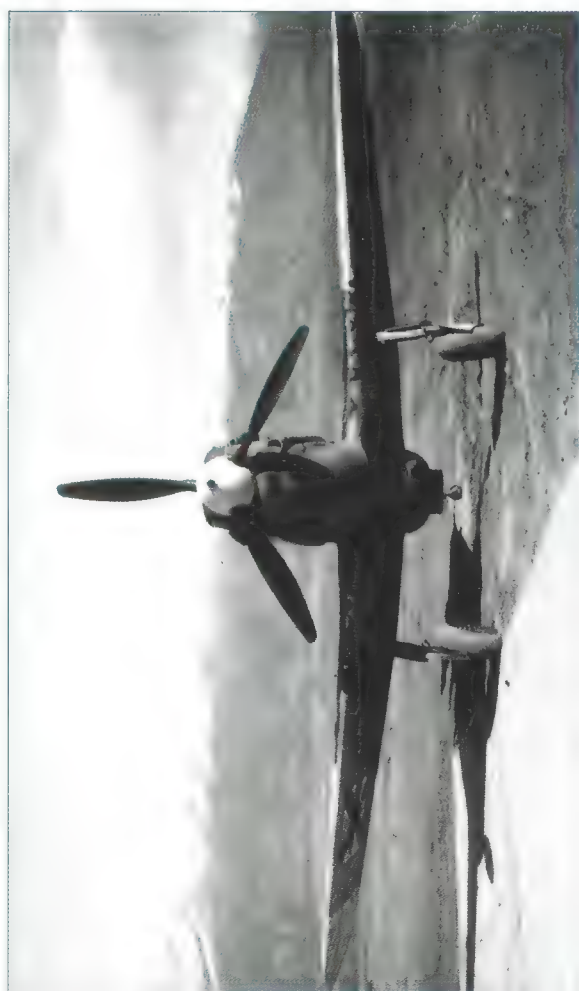
Fin Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74) with patches of unidentified Dark Green and Light Grey. Rudder Light Blue (RLM 76, with unidentified Dark Green on the upper area). Forward fuselage (in front of the cockpit) overpainted with unidentified Dark Green. Fuselage sides covered with Greenish Dark Grey (RLM 74), Mid-Grey (RLM 75) and unidentified Dark Green mottles. Mid-fuselage ring, both surfaces of wingtips and spinner in White (RLM 21). Crudely applied thin horizontal White stripe on mid-rudder (paint dripped). Propeller blades matt black (RLM 22).



Balázs Kakuk



The camouflage scheme and colours seen on this well-known, often published photo (usually of mediocre quality) of this D.520 (see also photo on page 207) are highly controversial. Generally, it is stated (and illustrated as such) that the machine was painted in original French camouflage colours (i.e., brown, green and mid-grey). That would explain, it's claimed, the shade visible on the top fuselage, which is darker than the German dark grey (RLM 74). By contrast, the Author believes that the original camouflage scheme is the typical Luftwaffe grey one, and the darker shade is actually the add-on Bulgarian dark green, observed in several occasions (see photo of Stuka wing root, the penultimate photo of this chapter). This $\frac{3}{4}$ front view also reveals a markedly darker shade of paint applied, in a rather crude manner, on the inner area of the wing leading edge. This could very well be the aforementioned dark green, applied to cover the areas where the original paint chipped off, or wore off. Often, the light coloured mid-fuselage band and/or wingtips are illustrated as yellow, which is a clear error, as they were white, a pro-Allied identification colour introduced on 19 September 1944. Based on his logbook, student pilot Ppor. Zhelyu Iv. Zhelev took off with D.520 No. 98, board number 14, on his first flight at Asen piloting school, on 24 April 1944.





Balázs Kakuk

D520 C1, White 2 (presumed), Iztrebiteľno-shturmova shkola, Telish, 1947.
Camouflage colours: unidentified Dark Green basecoat on the upper surfaces, with unidentified Light Grey squiggles all over. Light Blue on lower surfaces (possibly Soviet-origin aviation paints were used). Bulgarian tricolour applied as horizontal bands across the tail surface. Chipped off Black propeller spinner with white spiral. Propeller blades natural metal.

After the war's end, during scheduled general overhaul, or major repair work, the airframes were repainted in a new camouflage scheme, unofficially known as 'assault scheme'. It consisted of a dark green basecoat on the upper surfaces, with light grey squiggles all over. Presumably, the lower surfaces were in light blue. The precise shades of these camouflage colours are unidentified, possibly Soviet origin aviation paints were used, as the German paint stocks had been exhausted by then. The Bulgarian tricolour was applied as horizontal bands across the tail surface, as per the standard of the period (the white band is barely seen here on the fin top). The last D520s soldiered on until the early 1950s in unserviceable state; one being depicted here with weathered paintwork, being used as décor for memory shots of a new generation of Bulgarian airmen, for whom the defunct 'royalist' era and its obsolete artefacts were already a curiosity. Aircraft "No. 2" (no link to the NN) was flown by Podporuchik Zhebru Zhelev of 1/6. Orlyak from Bozhurishte airfield, on 8 December 1944. The upper number in the white triangle is presumed only.



UMe-109 *UStrela*

Dual-Control Bf 109G, Bulgarian style

The lack of a two-seat version of the Bf 109 fighter that would help train 'green' students to the trade of piloting the capricious '109 was a thorny issue to all Axis air forces, Bulgaria included. While the *Luftwaffe* – belatedly – came up with the solution of transforming older airframes into two-seaters, called Bf 109G-12, none of these ended up in Bulgarian hands.

To bridge this gap while training on the Bf 109E, the Bf 108 *Taifun* four-seat courier and sports aircraft was employed by the Bulgarians. However, even if the '109 was loosely based on the design of its elder sister, the '108, it was not ideal to train student fighter pilots on the slow and docile *Taifun*, powered by a weak Argus As 10C engine of only 240 hp, compared to the 1,475 HP of the DB 605A-1 engine fitted to the *Gustav*. It was merely a 'better than nothing' solution.

With the influx of a significant number of Bf 109Gs from 1943 on, the idea to solve the issue domestically sprung up. Design work – co-ordinated by Dipl.-Eng. Naydenov of the D.S.F. Karlovo Works – reportedly was finished by mid-1944; however, actual conversion happened only after the war's end.¹

Precise information is lacking; however, a small number of Bf 109G-6 airframes were transformed into two-seaters, with dual control, by adding an additional cockpit aft the regular one. Room was made by downsizing the L-shape main fuel tank and removing any power-boost equipment (GM-1, or MW-50) that may have been installed aft of the cockpit. This modification reduced fuel capacity from 400 litres to 260 litres, and hence the duration of flight fell by 45 minutes. An electric fuel pump gave way to a manual one. This added difficulty in properly calculating available fuel, thus flying time and range. Overall take-off weight slightly increased, while top speed was reduced. This, despite the cannon, armoured plate of the seat and oxygen system being removed. These differences did not have a significant effect on the overall performance of the trainer, though, which did not need the original range of the '109. A detail peculiar to the Bulgarian two-seater '109s² was that while the front cockpit canopy was the classic rectangular type, the aft one – based on the limited number of available photos – was the new, curved type of increased visibility (often referred to as 'Erla-Haube', or sometime as 'Galland-hood').

Although no direct proof surfaced from Bulgarian sources, based on the two-seater D.520 analogy (called officially UDv-520, see respective chapter), the Author assumes the two-seat version was most probably called UMe-109, although this has not yet been proven. What was proven, though, is that the official code name was *UStrela* and a separate *Nomenklaturen Nomer* was assigned to the type, namely 7111 – both new information, unpublished before.

The number of airframes transformed into two-seater in Bulgaria is uncertain, but was about a dozen. Prominent fighter pilot and top 'ace' Stoyan Stoyanov remembers flying the type, without giving the number of aircraft he flew. Test pilot and experienced instructor at the 'Fighter School', *Kapitan* Yordan Ferdinandov – former fighter pilot in 3/6. *Orlyak* – mentions in his memoirs that he had performed the first test flight of

'Pilot's monument', Yugoslav style. This ex-Bulgarian dual command UStrela, No. 9945, 'White 45' (W.Nr. 166168) of 172nd LAP, nosed over while taxiing on soft ground at Zemunik airfield, on 9 August 1952. The two airmen are still in the cockpit, waiting to be rescued. The additional second cockpit, added to a regular Bf 109G-6 airframe, is clearly visible also on the next page, top.



1 The Order of Battle of January 1946 does not list the UMe-109 (but lists the UYak-9).
2 It must be noted that it's erroneous to identify this local dual-control conversion as G-12 – the official Messerschmitt factory designation for its two-seat '109 type – as it was a Bulgarian design, a modification performed first in Bulgaria, then in Yugoslavia. The proper designation would be 'UMe-109', although this has not yet been proven by Bulgarian documents.



such a two-seat trainer, without giving a location, or date. After correcting a few minor weaknesses in the design, the test aircraft was completed, and more airframes were then converted. Ferdinandov recalls only two such aircraft; however, there were certainly more.

After the post-WW 2 peace treaty with Bulgaria was signed at Paris on 10 February 1947, when it took effect on 15 September the same year, the Bulgarian air force had to comply with the severe restrictions placed on the number of aircraft that could be kept in service. The treaty allowed Bulgaria to have “an air force, including any naval air arm, of 90 aircraft, including reserves, of which not more than 70 may be combat types of aircraft (...)”. (Part III, Section I, Article 9, Point d). Furthermore, Article 15 stipulated:

“1. Excess war material of Allied origin shall be placed at the disposal of the Allied or Associated Power concerned according to the instructions given by that Power. Excess Bulgarian war material shall be placed at the disposal of the Governments of the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Bulgaria shall renounce all rights to this material.

2. War material of German origin or design in excess of that required for the armed forces permitted under the present Treaty shall be placed at the disposal of the Three Governments. Bulgaria shall not acquire or manufacture any war material of German origin or design (...)

3. Excess war material mentioned in paragraphs 1 and 2 of this Article shall be handed over or destroyed within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty.”

The harsh terms of the peace treaty placed the Bulgarian armed forces, air force included, in a precarious situation. They had to get rid of hundreds of aircraft, and soon. As described previously, the solution came in a plan to transfer excess aircraft to Yugoslavia.

Among the combat aircraft handed over to Yugoslavia between late 1947 and the end of 1948 were 59 Bf 109Gs of all models – as detailed in the respective chapter – including six dual-seat versions. Most aircraft were transferred to Yugoslavia by air. The first such aircraft was reportedly flown by *Kpt.* Yordan Ferdinandov to the neighbouring country, with the task to instruct the Yugoslavs how to master the unusual two-seat sub-type. Eventually, these aircraft were collected on Zagreb airfield, where they were checked, repaired and repainted. Yugoslav serial numbers assigned to them were between 9941–9946 (all formerly G-6 airframes).

Despite this deal, quite a few UMe-109s remained in Bulgaria – at least five, but possibly seven³ – all transformed G-6 airframes (see annex). They were tasked with assisting in training the student pilots preparing to fly – ironically – Soviet aircraft types. Up to the early 1950s, the main task of the 36th Fighter Regiment (36. IAP) based at Karlovo was to train new pilots, partly on Bf 109s, before they would go to the USSR to learn to fly jet aircraft.

At an unspecified date in the first half of the 1950s, the following accident happened at Karlovo air base, involving a dual-seat Bf 109G *UStrela*. A young pilot, called Kiril Aleksandrov, prepared for a training sortie with “acting commander” Major Petkov. Upon lifting off, the propeller struck the ground, causing the aircraft to make a ground loop and end up on its back. The two airmen were rescued

3 Interestingly, two of these two-seat *UStrela* listed in the register, Nos. 1 and 5, were fitted with a DB 605AB [sic!] engine. By contrast, all other *UStrelas* were equipped with regular DB 605A-1 engines.

unhurt, although Major Petkov, who was sitting in the rear cockpit, was reportedly a little ‘squeezed’. Quite understandably, he was upset and reported the incident to the higher echelons.

Soon after this accident, also influenced by the changed political climate, now dominated by Communist ideology, unfavourable to so-called ‘fascist’ technology and anything that had to do with the ‘royalist’ times⁴, the Soviet-trained Commanding Officer of the air force, Major-General Zahari Zahariev, ‘Hero of the Soviet Union’ top award recipient, prohibited the further use of the Messerschmitt Bf 109. That point marked the end of the career of the Bf 109 in Bulgaria, in general, and particularly the service life of the dual-control version, Bulgarian style.

A little-known fact is that three ex-Bulgarian Bf 109G-6 airframes were converted to dual-seat, dual-control versions in Yugoslavia, too. This was undoubtedly based on the experiences of the Bulgarian rework, and probably guided by Bulgarian advisors. The YAF serial numbers of these dual-control Messerschmitts, called in Yugoslavia also ‘UMe 109’, were 9947 to 9949 (see pages 247–248 for details).

Colours and Markings

No actual photograph has surfaced showing a dual-control Bf 109G in Bulgaria⁵. Therefore, no details are known on the colours and markings they wore. Based on airmen’s memoirs, they must have worn three versions of the national markings: the pro-Axis cross-in-square type, the post-war roundel type (OF), and possibly the Communist inspired red star version, too.

As for identification, the original Bulgarian serial numbers were discarded and new running numbers, starting with 1, were introduced in late 1945. Similarly, the original *Nomenklaturen Nomer*, 7057, was cancelled in relation to the two-seater version, and a new one, 7111, introduced after the modification. Therefore, the complete NN of the very first two-seat *UStrela*, applied in the ubiquitous triangle, was 1/7111 (see colour artwork on next page).

⁴ Referring to the pre-war and wartime Kingdom (or Tsardom) of Bulgaria, and the soldiers who served in those times.

⁵ The single photo purportedly showing a two-seat ‘109 published in a well-known Bulgarian book by a well-known author is actually a retouched print, with the cross type VNVV markings manually applied over an all-metal Czechoslovak-made Avia CS-199 ‘Mezek’ (Mule) – a two-seater version powered by a Junkers Jumo 211F engine, produced locally from 1947-on – a radically different type, which never flew in Bulgaria.

Annex

Post-war List of Two-Seat UMe-109G *UStrela* in Bulgarian Service (renumbered S/N, NN 7111) – compiled by D. Bernád

| Original Type | Werknummer | Stammkennzeichen | Bulgarian Serial Number | Engine Type | Engine Werknummer | Date of registration | Notes |
|---------------|------------|------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------------|----------------------|---|
| Bf 109G-6 | 161462 | NP+VG | 1 | DB 605A-B | 011/04787 | 01.1944 | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161382 | NP+SE | 2 | DB 605A-1 | 26755 | 03.1944 | |
| Bf 109G-6 | | | 3 | | | | No info available |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161472 | NP+VQ | 4 | DB 605A-1 | V13 (sic!) | | Sold to Yugoslavia in 1947. Engine officially written off on 23 March 1947 (prior to be sold to Yugoslavia) |
| Bf 109G-6 | 16594 | KV+GP | 5 | DB 605A-B | 007/13419 | 06.1944 (sic!) | “Trophy”, captured in Austria. Originally given to <i>Regia Aeronautica</i> (Italy) in July 1943 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166152 | CW+ZV | 5 | DB 605A-1 | 00713548 | | Sold to Yugoslavia in 1947 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166098 | | 6 | DB 605A-1 | 00702400 | 07.1944 | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166122 | CR+RR | 7 | DB 605A-1 | 40014 | 07.1944 | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165104 | NR+EL | N/A | DB 605A-1 | 00204268 | | “Trophy”, captured in Austria. Sold to Yugoslavia in 1947 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161471 | NP+VP | N/A | DB 605A-1 | 79074 | | Sold to Yugoslavia in 1947. W.Nr. a typo? |
| Bf 109G-6 | 411991 | RX+GJ | N/A | DB 605A-1 | 36581 | | “Trophy”. Sold to Yugoslavia in 1947 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166168 | | N/A | DB 605A-1 | 36041 | | Sold to Yugoslavia in 1947 |



Because any reliable information on the dual-control Bf 109Gs (known as UMe-109 UStrela) in Bulgarian colours and markings is lacking, it was decided to show a 'bare' version, with only the basic Bulgarian markings the first aircraft flew with in 1945. As no photo of a dual-control 'Gustav' in Bulgarian service surfaced, the layout of the second cockpit was made based on photos of aircraft in Yugoslav markings. The NN, applied in the ubiquitous triangle on the tail surface, was 1/7111.



In this ex-Bulgarian dual-control UMe-109 of the Yugoslav air force, No. 9941, 'White 41' (W.Nr. 165104), died Kapetan (Captain) Dinko Morović and Zastavnik (Flight Officer) Đorđe Mileusić in a fatal crash during a training flight on 1 March 1952. The body of the student pilot is still in the front cockpit, lying sideways on a parachute. Notice the 'Erla-style' canopy of the second cockpit (of the instructor) placed against the broken starboard wing's trailing edge.

Appendices

VNVV (Royal Bulgarian Air Force)

Commanders (1931-1946)

- *Polkovnik* (Col. [earlier Navy Captain 1st Class, in 1928]) Ivan Andreev Mihaylov (born on 9.12.1887, fired from the Army in 1935, died in 1962).
Commander of the Air Force Regiment: 07.1931–01.06.1934;
Commander of the Directorate of Air Navigation: 01.06.1934–28.07.1935;
- *Podpolkovnik* (Lt. Col.) [later *Polkovnik* (Col.)] Georgi Minev Popvasilev (1893–1991)
Commander of the Air Force: 28.07.1935–22.10.1936
- *Polkovnik* (Colonel) [from 1940 *General-Mahyor* (Maj.-Gen.)] Vasil Tenev Boydev (1.01.1893–23.04.1983)
Commander of the Air Force: 23.10.1936–11.08.1941
- *General-Mahyor* (Maj.-Gen.) Dimităr Vasilev Ayryanov (5.09.1893–18.11.1950)*
Commander of the Air Force: 11.08.1941–09.09.1944
- *Polkovnik* (Col.) Georgi Stoimenov Drenikov (15.01.1897–6.11.1980)**
Acting Commander of the Air Force: 10.09.1944–10.10.1944
- *Polkovnik* (Col.) Petăr Ivanov Stanev (20.08.1900–04.06.1945)
Acting Commander of the Air Force: 10.10.1944–23.10.1944
- *Polkovnik* (Col.) [from 1945 *General-Mahyor* (Maj.-Gen.)] Gancho Ivanov Manchev (11.06.1894–23.06.1968)
Commander of the Air Force: 23.10.1944–10.12.1946

* Sentenced to life in prison by the so-called 'Bulgarian People's Court' as war criminal. Died in prison.

** First sentenced to death, sentence commuted to 5 years in prison and confiscation of all property and valuables.

Văzdushna Eskadra (Air Division)

- *Polkovnik* (Col.) Ivan Petrov Nozharov [former VNVV Chief of Staff until 14.03.1942. Replaced by *Podpolkovnik* (Lt. Col.) Sava Genov]. Commander until 13.09.1944***
- *Polkovnik* (Col.) Vălko [? probably Vasil] Vălkov, from 14.09.1944 to 19.09.1944
- *Polkovnik* (Col.) Boris Ivanov Gergov, from 20.09.1944

6. *Iztrebitelen Polk* (Fighter Regiment, or Wing)

- *Podpolkovnik* (Lt. Col.) Krăstyu M. Georgiev, to 6.03.1942
- *Polkovnik* (Col.) Vasil P. Vălkov, from 9.03.1942 to 13.09.1944****
- *Mahyor* (Major) Vasil I. Yordanov, from 14.09.1944 to 19.09.1944
- *Kapitan* (Cpt.) [Mahyor (Maj.) from 1.11.1944] Krăstyu A. Atanasov, from 20.09.1944

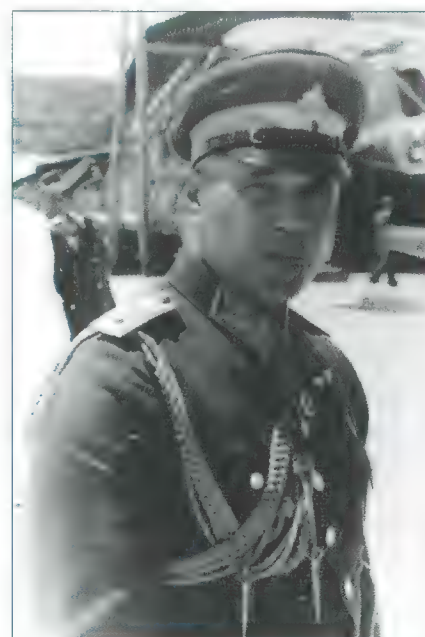
*** In 1945, sentenced by the People's Court to one year in prison (conditionally). Later rearrested.

**** Arrested in October 1944. Sentenced to death and hanged the same day, on 13 March 1945.

Right: The charismatic Major General Dimităr V. Ayryanov (often spelled erroneously as Ayrianov, Airyanov, or Ayranov) – although not an aviator himself, but coming from the Engineers army branch – led the Royal Bulgarian Air Force (VNVV) for over three years, in the tumultuous war years of 1941-1944. After the Communists took over power in early September 1944, he was arrested and jailed for life, sentence later reduced to 5 years. Although officially he was eventually released in 1950, no one saw him alive, so probably succumbed in captivity and was secretly buried in an unmarked grave.



Above: When the Bulgarian air force was officially unveiled by Tsar Boris III, Colonel Vasil T. Boydev was its commanding officer. He lasted almost five years in this top position.





Colonel Georgi S. Drenikov was the acting Commander of the Air Force for a month, following Bulgaria's about-face of early September 1944. He is depicted in 1943, as commander of the Vrazhdebna-based air training regiment.



VNV Commander-in-Chief Maj. Gen. Ayryanov (closer to the camera) is sitting in the cockpit of a Bf 108 Lebed along with Col. Nozharov, Commanding Officer of the recently established Air Eskadra (Division). Vrazhdebna (Sofia) airfield, 2 May 1942.

Colonel Vasil P. Vălkov was the commanding officer of the Bulgarian fighter force. He was in charge of the 6. Iztrebitelen Polk (Fighter Regiment) from March 1942 until the coup d'état of September 1944. After that date, he was demoted, incarcerated, then charged with treason. Vălkov was sentenced to death on 13 March 1945 and executed the very same day, with no chance of appeal.

Major Krăstyu (sometime written as 'Hristo') M. Georgiev was initially Commanding Officer of the 2. Iztrebitelen Orlyak (Fighter Group), from the late 1930s. Later on, he took over command, as Lt.-Col., of the 6. Iztrebitelen Polk (Fighter Regiment), until March 1942.

Cpt. Krăstyu A. Atanasov was the top Bulgarian fighter group commander. First, he led the élite 3/6. Iztrebitelen Orlyak (Fighter Group) and the Iztrebitelen Shkola (Fighter School), then the 6. Iztrebitelen Polk (Regiment) following Vălkov's demise on 13 September 1944. Atanasov often flew fighter aircraft, leading his men into combat. He was credited with two four-engine bombers shot down in group and two others damaged, earning him five victory points, all achieved when he was already 39 years old. Atanasov died in April 1978, at the age of 72.



Information from Original Documentation on the Transfer and Handover of Bf 109Gs to Bulgaria, as well as 'Trophy' Aircraft (1943-1945) compiled by Dénes Bernád

1, Bf 109G official delivery orders (listed chronologically, as extant in late July 1944):

- 16 Bf 109G-2 by (III) Nr. 8806/42 g. Kdos. from 10.12.1942 [delivered]
- 12 Bf 109G-2 – no reference document listed [delivered*]
- 3 Bf 109G-2** – no reference number given, dated 11.06.1943 [replacement aircraft, one most probably identical to the below listed aircraft]
- 1 Bf 109G** by (I) Nr. 16305/43 g.v. from 20.8.1943 [delivered]
- 50 Bf 109G-6 by (I) Nr. 1007/44 g.v. from 26.1.1944 [delivered]
- 63 Bf 109 – no reference document listed, date: July 1943 [delivered: 6 in Aug., 6 in Sept., 1 in Nov., 43 in Febr., 7 at unspecified date (note: most probably identical to the 12+1+50 listed above)]
- 80 Bf 109G-6 by (I) Nr. 9669/44 g.v. from 3.7.1944 [only 44 delivered (20 in July, 24 in August)]

Total: 125 aircraft [note by the author: certainly, more Bf 109Gs were delivered in total, including a few additional replacement aircraft]. Final, total number believed to be around 164 delivered 'Gustavs' (it is believed that only circa 158 received individual Bulgarian S/N).

Notes: * former I./JG 4 aircraft, handover planned for July 1943 (see page 155)** replacement aircraft

2, List of individual aircraft, as recorded on hand-written sheets in 1943 and 1944 (unofficial batch numbers, *Stammkennzeichen*, Bulgarian serial numbers and notes added by the Author):

| Type | Werknummer | Stammkennzeichen | Bulgarian S/N | Offer No. | Offer Date | Handover Location | Notes |
|---|------------|------------------|---------------|-----------|------------|----------------------|--|
| 1st batch: 16 G-2. Delivered by train on 25.02.1943. Taken over during the spring of 1943 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14793 | GJ+QK | 20 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14791 | GJ+QI | 21 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14732 | RJ+SB | 22 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14792 | GJ+QJ | 23 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942. Damaged on 1.08.1943 and replaced with W.Nr. 14561 (on 3, or 8.09.1943). Note: eventually, W.Nr. 14792 must have been returned to Bulgaria, as it was transferred to Yugoslavia after the war. Currently is preserved in the aviation museum in Belgrade, with Yugoslav AF number 9663, 'White 63' |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14742 | RJ+SL | 24 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14789 | GJ+QG | 25 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14788 | GJ+QF | 26 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14794 | GJ+QL | 27 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14790 | GJ+QH | 28 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14796 | GJ+QN | 29 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14785 | GJ+QC | 30 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14786 | GJ+QD | 31 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14733 | RJ+SC | 32 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14737 | RJ+SG | 33 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14797 | GJ+QO | 34 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14795 | GJ+QM | 35 | | 10.03.1943 | Marno-Pole | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| 2nd batch: 3 G-2. Replacement for destroyed Bf 109Es. Letter by Gruppe Technik-Sofia, dated 11.06.1943. Used aircraft (<i>Reparaturflugzeuge</i>), completely overhauled. Confirmed | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13517 | BJ+WN | 36 | 279 | 19.07.1943 | Marno-Pole (Karlovo) | Built by WNF in 1942. S/N confirmed. Formerly 'Black 11' of the 15.(kroat.)/JG 52, damaged 65% on 27.08.1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13491 | BC+VN | ?? | | | | Built by WNF in 1942. This W.Nr. was damaged 10% in air battle over Giurgiu, Rumania, on 4.04.1944, while flown by 8./JG 77 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 10365 | RF+FH | ?? | | | | Built by Erla Leipzig in mid-1942. This W.Nr. is given in <i>Luftwaffe</i> loss lists as total loss by 3./JG 54 on 08.08.1942 |

| Type | Werknummer | Stammkennzeichen | Bulgarian S/N | Offer No. | Offer Date | Handover Location | Notes |
|--|------------|------------------|---------------|-----------|------------|----------------------|---|
| 3 rd batch: 2 G-2. Taken over on 29.07.1943 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13546 | DL+IU | 37 | 279 | 19.07.1943 | Marno-Pole (Karlovo) | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14803 | GJ+QU | 38 | 279 | 19.07.1943 | Marno-Pole (Karlovo) | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| 4 th batch: 13 G-2. Taken over on 9.08., 29.09., as well as 6., 8. and 16.10.1943 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13937 | DL+HK | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. Taken over on 9.08.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14626 | VD+SZ | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. Taken over on 9.08.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14656 | KG+WD | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. Taken over on 9.08.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13793 | CH+GR | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in Sept. 1942. Taken over on 29.09.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 10360 | RF+FC | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by Erla Leipzig in mid-1942. Previously flown by <i>Ltn.</i> Walter Nowotny, 2./JG 54, crashed on 11.08.1942 (damaged 50%). Damaged during landing by <i>Luftwaffe</i> pilot Fichler, transport from Sofia to ASAM-Pipera (Rumania) on 26.03.1943. Repaired. Taken over on 29.09.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13878 | VF+DZ | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in Sept. 1942. Taken over on 6.10.1943. Engine fitted was W.Nr. V 17! |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14582 | RB+KH | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. With III./JG 52 in January 1943. Taken over on 6.10.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14710 | RF+UF | (47) | (N/A) | (N/A) | (N/A) | Built by WNF in 1942. Originally scheduled to be transferred to Bulgaria by Protocol 2363/26.08.1943, signed in Berlin. Handed over on 8.10.1943. No trace in Bulgarian records! |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14220 | BL+IG | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by Messerschmitt Regensburg in mid-1942. Taken over on 8.10.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14740 | RJ+SJ | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. Must be a typo, as this W.Nr. was sold to Finland on 9.03.1943 and crashed there on 28.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13512 | BJ+WI | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. Handed over on 16.10.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13961 | | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. Handed over on 16.10.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 10476 | RD+KF | | 362 | 23.12.1943 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by Erla Leipzig in 1942. Handed over on 16.10.1943 |
| 5 th batch: 4 G-2trop. Taken over on 15.12.1943 and 13.01.1944 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2trop | 13449 | CC+ZX | | 1 | 13.01.1944 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. Flown 91,06 hrs. since build and flown 1,25 hrs. since last major overhaul. Handed over on 15.12.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2trop | 13660 | PM+QE | | 1 | 13.01.1944 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in August 1942. Flown 173,07 hrs. since build and flown 1,29 hrs. since last major overhaul. Handed over on 15.12.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2trop | 14816 | GF+ER | (54) | 1 | 13.01.1944 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. Flown 20,22 hrs. since build and flown 1,30 hrs. since last major overhaul. Handed over on 15.12.1943 |
| Bf 109G-2trop | 14662 | KG+WJ | | 1 | 13.01.1944 | Pipera (Rumania) | Built by WNF in 1942. Flown 2,13 hrs. since last major overhaul. Handed over on 13.01.1944 |
| Replacement: G-2 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14561 | RP+WI | | 363 | 3.09.1943 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in 1942. Replacement for W.Nr. 14792, damaged earlier. Handed over on 3.(or 8.) 09.1943 |
| 6 th batch: 8 G-6. Taken over on 29.06.1944 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161331 | NP+QF | | 104 | 5.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |

| Type | Werknummer | Stammkenn- zeichen | Bulgarian S/N | Offer No. | Offer Date | Handover Location | Notes |
|--|------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------|------------|---------------------|---|
| Bf 109G-6 | 161391 | NP+SN | | 104 | 5.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161462 | NP+VG | | 104 | 5.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 Transformed in two-seater U version |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161470 | NP+VO | | 104 | 5.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161478 | NP+VW | | 104 | 5.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Ferried by 1.(SO)/FIÜG 1. Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161693 | NP+XB | | 104 | 5.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161698 | NP+XG | | 104 | 5.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161705 | NP+XN | | 104 | 5.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Replacement: G-2 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14586 | RB+KL | | 125 | 5.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in 1942. With Stab/JG 52 in March 1943. W.Nr. originally written 14582, corrected by hand writing. Handed over on 5.02.1944 |
| 7th batch: 8 G-6. Taken over on 29.06.1944 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161461 | NP+VF | (64) | 105 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161472 | NP+VQ | | 105 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944. Transformed in two-seater U version |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161473 | NP+VR | (66) | 105 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161476 | NP+VU | | 105 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161477 | NP+VV | | 105 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161481 | NP+VZ | | 105 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161482 | | | 105 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161699 | NP+XH | | 105 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 29.06.1944 |
| Replacement: G-6 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161329 | NP+QD | | 103 | 1.03.1944 | Bozhurishte | Handed over on 5.03.1944 |
| 8th batch: 7 G-2 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13599 | RG+SV | | 124 | 26.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in July 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14613 | VD+SM | | 124 | 26.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in late 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13862 | VF+DJ | | 124 | 26.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in Sept. 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13884 | VG+LF | | 124 | 26.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14524 | DG+VX | | 124 | 26.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14831 | NN+ZK | | 124 | 26.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 10755 | NN+LQ | | 124 | 26.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by Erla Leipzig in 1942 (G-2trop) |
| 9th batch: 4 G-2 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13499 | BC+VV | | 106 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13742 | RJ+UP | | 106 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in August 1942. Ex-3./JG 5 machine, left behind in Bulgaria |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13918 | DU+YR | | 106 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in 1942. Stkz. also for Fw 190A-8 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14597 | RB+KW | | 106 | 31.01.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Replacement: G-4 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-4 | 16237 | CO+ZJ | | 108 | 22.02.1944 | Bozhurishte | Built by Messerschmitt, Regensburg. Sub-type written as such in the 'master' list. Sub-type given in the official write-off document as G-2. G-4 in German lists. |
| 10th batch: 5 G-2 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13416 | GT+WP | | 107 | 22.02.1944 | German Mission | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14246 | CC+PQ | | 107 | 22.02.1944 | German Mission | Built by Messerschmitt, Regensburg in Aug. 1942 (as G-2trop). Flown by UKdo Lz.Gr 11 in May 1943 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14701 | KJ+DW | | 107 | 22.02.1944 | German Mission | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 10323 | BH+IE | | 107 | 22.02.1944 | German Mission | Built by Erla Leipzig in May 1942. Formerly with 3./JG 5 (accident on 4.12.1943, 15%) |
| Bf 109G-2 | 10677 | | | 107 | 22.02.1944 | German Mission | Built by Erla Leipzig in 1942 (G-2trop) |
| 11th batch: 25 G-6 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161479 | NP+VX | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Vr.=Vrazhdebna |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162330 | BR+XJ | (100) | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |

| Type | Werknummer | Stammkennzeichen | Bulgarian S/N | Offer No. | Offer Date | Handover Location | Notes |
|---|--------------------|------------------|---------------|-----------|------------|----------------------------|--|
| Bf 109G-6 | 162416 | TV+KR | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162419 | TV+KU | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162480 | BE+RD | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162516 | BE+SA | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162520 | BE+SE | (105) | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162524 | BE+SI | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162527 | BE+SL | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162540 | RU+EJ | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162543 | RU+EM | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162561 | RU+FE | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162472 | BF+VV | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162702 | RU+LP | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vrazhdebna | Built by Messerschmitt Regensburg. Ferried to Sofia by 3.(Süd)/FIÜG 1 on 31 March 1944. Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162703 | RU+LQ | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vrazhdebna | Built by Messerschmitt Regensburg. Ferried to Sofia by 3.(Süd)/FIÜG 1 on 31 March 1944. Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162719 | RU+MG | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161058 | RL+JF | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 Intended for Spain in Nov. 1943 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162685 | RU+JY | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vrazhdebna | Built by Messerschmitt Regensburg. Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163321 | RQ+EG | (117) | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vrazhdebna | Built by Messerschmitt Regensburg. DB 605A-1 engine W.Nr. 00200196. Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163323 | RQ+EI | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163318 | RQ+ED | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162992 | TS+RK | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163010 | TS+SC | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163012 | TS+SE | (122) | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163013 | TS+SF | | 187 | 2.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| 12th batch: 3 G-6 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162698 (163698) | RU+LL | | 268 | 12.05.1944 | German Mission, Vrazhdebna | Built by Messerschmitt Regensburg. Ferried to Sofia by 3.(Süd)/FIÜG 1 on 31 March 1944. Handed over on 27.07.1944. The German language document lists W.Nr. 163698 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163322 | RQ+EH | (125) | 268 | 12.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162482 | BE+RF | | 268 | 12.05.1944 | German Mission, Vr. | Handed over on 27.07.1944 |
| 13th batch: 3 G-6 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161330 | NP+QE | | 102 | 14.03.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161382 | NP+SE | | 102 | 14.03.1944 | German Mission | Ferried by 1.(Süd-Ost)/FIÜG 1 in February 1944. Flown by Uffz. Zechmeister from Aspern to Semlin (Zemun) on 5.02.1944. Transformed in two-seater U version |
| Bf 109G-6 | 161694 | NP+XC | | 102 | 14.03.1944 | German Mission | |
| 14th batch: 27 G-6 and Ga-6 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163262 | RQ+BZ | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163267 | RQ+CE | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163275 | RQ+CM | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165024 | NP+JJ | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165048 | NP+EH | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165077 | NT+OK | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165085 | NT+OS | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165086 | NT+OT | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165088 | NT+OV | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165089 | NT+OW | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165092 | NT+OZ | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165094 | NR+EB | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | Photo exists |

| Type | Werknummer | Stammkenn- zeichen | Bulgarian S/N | Offer No. | Offer Date | Handover Location | Notes |
|---|------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------|------------|-------------------|--|
| Bf 109G-6 | 165097 | NR+EE | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165098 | NR+EF | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165099 | NR+EG | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165102 | NR+EJ | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165104 | NR+EL | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | Transformed in two-seater U version |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165105 | NR+EM | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 165106 | NR+EN | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760221 | DT+XA | (145) | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760224 | DT+XD | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760235 | DT+XO | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760239 | DT+XS | (149) | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760240 | DT+XT | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760241 | DT+XU | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760254 | DT+ZH | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109G-6 | 163713 | KL+FG | | 275 | 30.05.1944 | German Mission | |
| 15 th batch: 7 G-6 and Ga-6 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162694 | RU+LH | | 315 | 21.06.1944 | German Mission | Built by Messerschmitt Regensburg |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760242 | DT+XV | | 315 | 21.06.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary). Used by 4./JG 51 in June 1944 |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760244 | DT+XX | | 315 | 21.06.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760245 | DT+XY | (156) | 315 | 21.06.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760247 | DT+ZA | | 315 | 21.06.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760248 | DT+ZB | | 315 | 21.06.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| Bf 109Ga-6 | 760261 | DT+ZO | | 315 | 21.06.1944 | German Mission | Built by MWG (Hungary, 1944) |
| 16 th batch: 5 (rather 4) G-2 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 10440 | BL+FV | | 126 | 1.03.1944 | German Mission | Built by Erla Leipzig in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13472 | CI+KU | | 126 | 1.03.1944 | German Mission | Built by WNF in 1942. Formerly of I./JG 5 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14522 | DG+VV | | 126 | 1.03.1944 | German Mission | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14617 | VD+SQ | | 126 | 1.03.1944 | German Mission | Built by WNF in 1942 |
| Bf 109G-2 | N/A | | N/A | 126 | 1.03.1944 | German Mission | Blank W.Nr. in hand-written Bulgarian master list. No info is given. Probably not a valid entry |
| No further batches can be identified by offer number/date. 21 G-6 | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166154 | CW+ZX | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 29.06.1944. Transferred by FlÜG 1, damaged at Malacky on 29.07.1944. Date conflict! |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166156 | CW+ZZ | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166166 | | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166168 | | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 29.06.1944. Transformed in two-seater U version |
| Bf 109G-6 | 162508 | BE+RS | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 10.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166017 | KW+YQ | (162) | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166089 | | (163) | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166098 | | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944. Transformed in two-seater U version |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166105 | CR+RA | (165) | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166110 | CR+RF | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944. The German language document lists W.Nr. 166109 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166112 | CR+RH | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166113 | CR+RI | (168) | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166116 | CR+RL | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166119 | CR+RO | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166122 | CR+RR | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 26.07.1944. Transformed in two-seater U version |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166095 | | (172) | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166103 | | (173) | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166140 | CW+ZJ | | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 29.06.1944 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166148 | CW+ZR | (175) | | | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 29.06.1944 |

| Type | Werknummer | Stammkennzeichen | Bulgarian S/N | Offer No. | Offer Date | Handover Location | Notes |
|--|------------|------------------|---------------|-----------|------------|-------------------|--|
| Bf 109G-6 | 166150 | CW+ZT | 176 | | | Bozhurishte | Confirmed link between airframe and engine W.Nr. and Bulgarian S/N. Delivered on 29.06.1944. Written off on 16.08.1944, thus actually delivered by the Germans (not the last one). |
| Bf 109G-6 | 166152 | CW+ZV | 177 (?) | | 21.08.1944 | Bozhurishte | Delivered on 15.08.1944. Statement on delivery and condition taken at Bozhurishte on 21.08.1944. Replacement aircraft? Not included in the hand-over documents. Last Bf 109G handed over by the Germans? Transformed in two-seater U version |
| Captured ('trophy') Bf 109Gs transferred to Bulgaria after the war | | | | | | | |
| Bf 109G | N/A | | 178 | | | | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev on 24 July 1945, after he transferred a G-10 from Pécs (Hungary) to Bozhurishte. Not proven it's a 'trophy', but if so, it's the first one |
| Bf 109G-10 | N/A | | 182 | | | | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev on 20 July 1945, right after he transferred a G-10 from Pécs (Hungary) to Bozhurishte (without a serial number), then from there to Sliven (with this serial number). "Trophy"! |
| Bf 109G | N/A | | 192 | | | | Highest Bulg. S/N found in the archives |

Note to the table: the delivery batch numbers, *Stammkennzeichen*, actual and presumed Bulgarian serial number, in brackets, and notes were added by the Author.

Post-war List of Single-Seat Bf 109G *Strela* in Service (renumbered S/Ns, NN 7057) – compiled by Dénes Bernád

| Type | Werknummer | Stammkennzeichen | Bulgarian S/N | Engine Type | Engine Werknummer | Date of registration | Notes |
|-------------|------------|------------------|---------------|-------------|-------------------|----------------------|---|
| Bf 109G-2 | 14794 | GJ+QL | 2 | DB 605A | 002/04919 | 04.1943 | Formerly 27/7057 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14796 | GJ+QN | 3 | DB 605A-1 | 78444 | 04.1943 | Formerly 29/7057 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13793 | CH+GR | 4 | DB 605A-1 | 00703773 | 10.1943 | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14582 | RB+KH | 5 | DB 605A-1 | 40021 | 10.1943 | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14833 | NN+ZM | 6 | DB 605A-1 | 1102618 | 11.1943 | Could be a typo for W.Nr. 14831 |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13449 | CC+ZX | 7 | DB 605A-1 | 78922 | 12.1943 | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13599 | RG+SV | 8 | DB 605A-1 | 00204142 | 12.1943 | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 13416 | GT+WP | 9 | DB 605A-1 | 1900161 | 02.1944 | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14246 | CC+PQ | 10 | DB 605A-1 | 00709496 | 02.1944 | |
| Bf 109G-2 | 14701 | KJ+DW | 11 | DB 605A-1 | 00204263 | 02.1944 | |
| Bf 109G | | | 18 | | | | Flown repeatedly by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev off Sliven airfield in Nov.-Dec. 1945 |
| Bf 109G | | | 19 | | | | Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev off Sliven airfield on 22 Nov. 1945 |
| Bf 109G-14 | 464625 | | 22 | DB 605A-1 | 37385 | 04.1944 [sic!] | "Trophy" aircraft. Built by Erla, 04.1944. Flown by <i>Por.</i> Petăr Manolev off Sliven airfield on 22 Nov. 1945 |
| Bf 109G-6 | 413787 | | 23 | DB 605A-1 | 27613 | | "Trophy" aircraft. Built by Erla, 07.1944. Flown by <i>Por.</i> Manolev off Vrazhdebna on 14.03.1946. |
| Bf 109Ga-14 | 510908 | | 24 | DB 605A-1 | 60204184 | | "Trophy" aircraft. Built by MWG, 10.1944 |
| Bf 109G-14 | 785728 | | 25 | DB 605A-1 | 77531 | | "Trophy" aircraft. Built by M'tt, 11.1944 |
| Bf 109G | | | 26 | | | | Turned on its back in accident, written off (photo) |
| Bf 109G-14 | 782764 | | 27 | DB 605A-1 | 00203664 | | "Trophy" aircraft. Built by M'tt, 9.1944 |
| Bf 109G-14 | 780898 | | 28 | DB 605A-1 | 00704527 | | "Trophy" aircraft. Built by M'tt, 8.1944 |
| Bf 109G-10 | 610589 | | 29 | DB 605A-1 | 79188 | | "Trophy" aircraft. Built by WNF, 1.1945 |

| | | | | | | | |
|------------|--------|--|----|-----------|----------|--|---|
| Bf 109G | 612737 | | 30 | DB 605A-1 | 00703148 | | "Trophy" aircraft. Built by WNF, 1.1945. Broken port undercarriage, repaired (photo). G-10 by W.Nr. |
| Bf 109G-10 | 770284 | | 31 | DB 605D | 11200075 | | "Trophy" aircraft. Built by WNF, 3.1945 |
| Bf 109G | | | 32 | | | | Accident photo |
| Bf 109G-2 | | | 34 | | | | Belly landed (photo) |

Note to the table: the aircraft sub-types, *Stammkennzeichen* and notes were added by the Author. Aircraft handed over to Yugoslavia in 1947 are not included.

General note: As mentioned in the chapter, serial (board) numbers were started anew in October 1945, opening with 1.

Based on his logbook, *Ppor. Stefan Marinopolski* flew the following Bf 109G-6s still wearing German markings in 1944:

| Date | Stkz. | Location | Note |
|------------|--------|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| 11.02.1944 | HP+VO | Vrazhdebna | Actually NP+VO, W.Nr. 161470 |
| 4.04.1944 | BE+VV | Vrazhdebna | Combat sortie. No match with W.Nr. |
| 4.04.1944 | BE+VV | Vrazhdebna | Combat sortie. No match with W.Nr. |
| 6.05.1944 | TS+SF | Vrazhdebna | Combat sortie. W.Nr. 163013 |
| 18.05.1944 | TS+SF | Vrazhdebna | Combat sortie. W.Nr. 163013 |
| 19.05.1944 | TS+SF | Vrazhdebna | W.Nr. 163013 |
| 22.05.1944 | RU+LL | Vrazhdebna-Karlovo | W.Nr. 162698 |
| 20.06.1944 | DT+XS | Karlovo | W.Nr. 760239 |
| 21.06.1944 | DT+XV* | Karlovo | W.Nr. 760242 |

*DT+XV is mentioned as with the *Luftwaffe 4./JG 51* in June 1944.

Bulgarian Bf 109Gs Transferred to Yugoslavia (1947–1948)

compiled by Boris Ciglić & Milan Micevski, with additional information by the Author (*)

| Yugoslav Serial No. | Sub-type, as per Yugoslav Register | W.Nr. | Stkz.* | Other information* |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|--------|--------|---|
| 9611 | G-10 | 150880 | | Built by Erla, Dec. 1944. "Trophy" ex-II./JG 52, captured at Zeltweg |
| 9612 | G-6 | 161329 | NP+QD | |
| 9613 | G-6 | 161477 | NP+VV | |
| 9614 | G-6 | 161482 | | |
| 9615 | G-6 (later converted to U) | 161694 | NP+XC | Transformed in two-seater UMe-109 in Yugoslavia (S/N 9948) |
| 9616 | G-6 | 161705 | NP+XN | |
| 9617 | G-6 | 162482 | BE+RF | |
| 9618 | G-6 | 162508 | BE+RS | |
| 9619 | G-6 | 162540 | RU+EJ | |
| 9620 | G-6 | 162543 | RU+EM | |
| 9621 | G-6 | 163267 | RQ+CE | |
| 9622 | G-6 | 163275 | RQ+CM | |
| 9623 | G-6 | 163321 | RQ+EG | |
| 9624 | G-6 | | | No airframe W.Nr. available. Engine W.Nr. 78402 (originally fitted to NN 33/7057) |
| 9625 | G-6 | 165048 | NP+EH | |
| 9626 | G-6 | 165085 | NT+OS | |
| 9627 | G-6 | 165086 | NT+OT | |
| 9628 | G-6 | 165088 | NT+OV | |
| 9629 | G-6 | 165092 | NT+OZ | |
| 9630 | G-6 (later converted to U) | 165097 | NR+EE | Transformed in two-seater UMe-109 in Yugoslavia (S/N 9949) |
| 9631 | G-6 | 165106 | NR+EN | Messerschmitt AG |
| 9632 | G-6 | 166112 | CR+RH | Messerschmitt AG |
| 9633 | G-6 | 166116 | CR+RL | Messerschmitt AG |

| | | | | |
|------|----------------------------|--------|-------|---|
| 9634 | G-6 | 166119 | CR+RO | Messerschmitt AG |
| 9635 | G-6 (later converted to U) | 166140 | CW+ZJ | Messerschmitt AG. Transformed in two-seater UMe-109 in Yugoslavia (S/N 9947) |
| 9636 | G-6 | 166154 | CW+ZX | Messerschmitt AG |
| 9637 | G-6 | 166156 | CW+ZZ | Messerschmitt AG |
| 9638 | G-6 | 166166 | | Messerschmitt AG |
| 9639 | G-8 | 202045 | | "Trophy", captured at Zeltweg |
| 9640 | G-10 | 491187 | | Erla in Dec. 1944. "Trophy", ex-MKHL 101/II., captured at Raffelding |
| 9641 | G-14 | 511006 | | MWG in 1944. "Trophy", ex-MKHL101/III., captured at Raffelding |
| 9642 | G-14 | 511903 | | WNF in Oct. 1944. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9643 | G-14 | 512456 | | WNF in Nov. 1944. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9644 | G-10 | 610937 | | WNF in Jan. 1945. "Trophy", ex-II./JG 52, captured at Zeltweg. Now a museum exhibit in the USA |
| 9645 | G-10 | 611023 | | WNF in Feb. 1945. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9646 | G-10 | 611032 | | WNF in Feb. 1945. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9647 | G-10 | 611076 | | WNF in Feb. 1945. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9648 | G-10 | 612771 | | WNF in March 1945. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9649 | G-10 | 612779 | | WNF in March 1945. "Trophy", ex-MKHL 101/I., captured at Raffelding |
| 9650 | G-10 | 613090 | | WNF in March 1945. "Trophy", ex-MKHL 101/III., captured at Raffelding |
| 9651 | G-6 | 760221 | | MWG. Actually Ga-6 |
| 9652 | G-6 | 760254 | | MWG. Actually Ga-6 |
| 9653 | G-6 | 760261 | | MWG. Actually Ga-6 |
| 9654 | G-14 | 781311 | NX+FK | Messerschmitt AG, Aug. 1944. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9655 | G-14 | 782264 | | Messerschmitt AG, Aug. 1944. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9656 | G-14 | 782764 | | Messerschmitt AG, Sept. 1944. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9657 | G-14 | 785043 | | Messerschmitt AG, Nov. 1944. "Trophy" from Austria |
| 9658 | G-2 | 10755 | NN+LQ | Erla |
| 9659 | G-2 | 13499 | BC+VV | WNF |
| 9660 | G-2 | 14732 | RJ+SB | WNF |
| 9661 | G-2 | 14733 | RJ+SC | WNF |
| 9662 | G-2 | 14791 | GJ+QI | WNF |
| 9663 | G-2 | 14792 | GJ+QJ | WNF |
| 9941 | G-6 (later converted to U) | 165104 | NR+EL | Messerschmitt AG. Transformed in two-seater UMe-109 in Bulgaria |
| 9942 | G-6 (later converted to U) | 161471 | NP+VP | Messerschmitt AG. Transformed in two-seater UMe-109 in Bulgaria. Note: W.Nr. must be a typo, as this aircraft of 10./JG 27 was lost in Hungary on 19.03.1944. 161471 is not listed in export documents. Could be 161470 |
| 9943 | G-6 (later converted to U) | 161472 | NP+VQ | Messerschmitt AG. Ex-White 4 (in VV). Transformed in two-seater UMe-109 in Bulgaria |
| 9944 | G-6 (later converted to U) | 166152 | CW+ZV | Messerschmitt AG. Ex-White 5 (in VV). Transformed in two-seater UMe-109 in Bulgaria |
| 9945 | G-6 (later converted to U) | 166168 | | Messerschmitt AG. Transformed in two-seater UMe-109 in Bulgaria. Photo |
| 9946 | G-6 (later converted to U) | 411991 | RX+GJ | WNF. This particular W.Nr. (if it's correct) belly landed with battle damage near Butau (Buzău, Rumania?) in mid-August 1944. Possibly transferred to Bulgaria from stocks captured at ASAM-Pipera after the Rumanian about-face of 23.08.1944. Transformed in two-seater UMe-109 in Bulgaria |

Note: Many of the 32 Bf 109Gs officially written off in three batches, dated 28 Oct. 1946 (12 a/c), 26 Nov. 1946 (10 a/c) and 23 March 1947 (10 a/c, including "trophies") – see write-off dates in Annex 3, pages 117–120 – were subsequently transferred to Yugoslavia.

Fighter and Fighter-Trainer Aircraft Types in Service with the Bulgarian Air Force (1922–1952) compiled by Dénes Bernád (2000–2019)

| Aircraft Make, Type and Sub-type (Note) | Bulgarian Code Name | Bulgarian Code Name (English Transliteration) | Bulgarian Code Name (English Translation) | Nomenklaturen Nomer (Registration Number) | Total Number in Service (Note) | Service Years | Civilian Registers and/or Military Serial Numbers |
|--|---------------------|---|---|---|---|---------------|---|
| Fokker D.VII | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 1 | 1922-1928 | B-BIXP |
| DAR-5 (prototype) | Бръмбар | <i>Brămbar</i> | Beetle | N/A | 1 | 1930-1942 | B-BUDA, then LZ-UDA |
| Heinkel He 51C | Сокол | <i>Sokol</i> | Falcon | 7007 | 12 | 1937-1945 | 11-No., 22-No., 33-No., 1-12 |
| PZL P.24B | Ястреб | <i>Yastreb</i> | Kestrel | 7017 | 12 | 1937-1944 | 11-No., 22-No., 33-No., 1-12 |
| Arado Ar 65F | Орел | <i>Orel</i> | Eagle | 7027 | 12 | 1937-1945 | 101-112, later 1-12 |
| Focke-Wulf Fw 56A-1 | Комар | <i>Komar</i> | Gnat | 7003 | 6 | 1937-1946 | 11-No., 22-No., 33-No., later 1-6 |
| Avia B.534-II, IV and V | Доган | <i>Dogan</i> | Hunting falcon | 7037 | 77 | 1940-1947 | 1-77 |
| Avia Bš.122, Ba.122 | Оса | <i>Osa</i> | Wasp | 7013 | 29 | 1939-1947 | 1-29, LZ-TAD |
| Arado Ar 96A, B-1 (armed and unarmed), B-7 | Сойка | <i>Soyka</i> | Jay | 7035, 7042 | 4+20+10+~22 (captures)+2 (Czechoslovak)=~58 | 1941-1955 | 1-20 (rear gunner), 1-38 (unarmed) |
| Messerschmitt Bf 109E-3, E-3a | Стрела | <i>Strela</i> | Arrow | 7047 | 19 | 1940-1946 | 1-19 |
| Messerschmitt Bf 109G-2, G-4, G-6, Ga-6, Ga-8, G-14, Ga-14, G-10 | Стрела | <i>Strela</i> | Arrow | 7057 | 59 G-2, 1 G-4, 104+ G-6, 100+ (captures) = 264+ | 1943-1952 | Initially black numbers 20-35, then black, white, red, green numbers 1-16, and yellow 1-6, later white numbers 1-40 |
| Avia B-135 (AV-135) | N/A | N/A | N/A | 7067 (7057 actually used) | 12 | 1943-1945 | 1-12 |
| Dewoitine D.520C1 | Девоатин | <i>Devoatin</i> | Dewoitine | 7077 | 100 | 1943-1947 | White, red, green numbers 1-16, yellow 1-6, later white numbers 1-40 (?) |
| Messerschmitt Bf 109G Dual-Control (UMe-109) | УСтрела | <i>UStrela</i> | U-Arrow | 7111 | ~12 | 1945-1952 | 1-12 |
| Dewoitine D.520 Dual-Control (UDv-520) | УДевоатин | <i>UDevoatin</i> | U-Dewoitine | N/A | 1+ | 1945-1948 | N/A |

Note: the Soviet-made Yakovlev Yak-9D, M, P, U, UT single-seat fighter (NN 7087 & 7097) and Yak-9V (in Bulgaria UYak-9, NN 7081) two-seat fighter-trainer, delivered from 1945, are outside the scope of this book.

An

RLM - GL/F 1

**Für das bei Feindberührung und anschließender Bruch-
landung beschädigte Flugzeug Bf 109 G 2 Werknummer 14792
wird ein Ersatzflugzeug Bf 109 G 2 zur Lieferung an Bul-
garien freigegeben. Das Ersatzflugzeug wird durch Genst.
Gen.Qu.6.Abt.(III) in den nächsten Tagen zugewiesen werden.
GL/F 1 wird gebeten, das Weitere zu veranlassen.**

Document of DLM Bul-
garien, dated 20.08.1943,
mentioning that Bf 109G-2,
W.Nr. 14792, which crash
landed after combat [on
1.08.1943] has to be
replaced.

List of Aircraft Type *Nomenklaturen Nomer* (Registration Number)

Reconstruction by Dénes Bernád (2000-2019)

| Type | Maker | Code Name | NN | Notes |
|----------------------|---------------|--------------------------|--------|--|
| DAR-1A | DAR | <i>Peperuda</i> | 7001 | Unconfirmed |
| DAR-8/8A | DAR | <i>Slavey</i> | 7002 | |
| Fw 56A | Focke-Wulf | <i>Komar</i> | 7003 | |
| Fw 58 B/C/KB | Focke-Wulf | <i>Gäläb</i> | 7004 | During wartime spelled гълъбъ, from 1946 Гълъб |
| DAR-3 | DAR | <i>Garvan I</i> | 7006 | |
| He 51C | Heinkel | <i>Sokol</i> | 7007 | |
| Do 11D | Dornier | <i>Prilep</i> | 7008 | |
| Ju 87R/D/G | Junkers | <i>Shtuka</i> | 7009 | |
| KB-3 | SFBK | <i>Chuchuliga I</i> | 7012 | |
| Bš.122 | Avia | <i>Osa</i> | 7013 | |
| A 20a | Focke-Wulf | <i>Rozelius</i> | 7015 | |
| P.24b | P.Z.L. | <i>Yastreb</i> | 7017 | |
| B.71 | Avia | <i>Zherav</i> | 7018 | |
| Il-2 | Ilyushin | | 7019 | Two-seat version, with rear gunner. Note: one occurrence found for a 'trophy' Ju 87G-2, where the NN is listed as 7019 (probably a typo) |
| Fw 44J | Focke-Wulf | <i>Vrabche</i> | 7021 | |
| KB-4 | SFBK | <i>Chuchuliga II</i> | 7022 | |
| KB-6/KB-309 | SFBK | <i>Papagal</i> | 7024 | |
| He 45F/S | Heinkel | <i>Shtärkel</i> | 7026 | |
| Ar 65F | Arado | <i>Orel</i> | 7027 | |
| MB.200 Bn5 | Aero | <i>Buhal</i> | 7028 | |
| Il-10 | Ilyushin | | 7029 | |
| He 72 | Heinkel | <i>Kanarche</i> | 7031 | |
| KB-5 | SFBK | <i>Chuchuliga III</i> | 7032 | |
| Laz-7/Laz-7M (ZAK-1) | Lazarov/ZAK | <i>Lastovitsa</i> | 7034 | Post-war design. First flight in 1948 (Laz-7) and 1952 (Laz-7M/ZAK-1). ZAK=Zavodski Avtorski Kolektov, or Collective of Factory Authors |
| Ar 96B | Arado | <i>Soyka</i> | 7035 | Unarmed version |
| P.43 | P.Z.L. | <i>Chayka</i> | 7036 | |
| B.534 | Avia | <i>Dogan</i> | 7037 | |
| Do 17Ka/M/P/Z | Dornier | <i>Uragan</i> | 7038 | |
| Bü 131B | Bücker | <i>Lyastovitsa</i> | 7041 | Occasionally spelled as <i>Lastovitsa</i> |
| Ar 96B | Arado | <i>Soyka</i> | 7042 | Armed version |
| Ar 96A | Arado | <i>Soyka</i> | 7045? | Unconfirmed. Could also be 7095, or simply a typo |
| Ju 52/3m | Junkers | <i>Sova</i> | 7045 | Aircraft acquired post war also have the same NN |
| DAR-3A | DAR | <i>Garvan II</i> | 7046 | Initially DAR-3-Yu, then DAR-3-b |
| Bf 109E | Messerschmitt | <i>Strela</i> | 7047 | |
| Pe-2 | Petlyakov | <i>Prilep</i> | 7048 | A write-off documents lists it as 7049, probably a typo |
| DAR-9 | DAR | <i>Simiger</i> | 7051 | |
| Bf 108B | Messerschmitt | <i>Lebed</i> | 7052 | |
| A.304 | Aero | <i>Pelikan</i> | 7055 | |
| DAR-3 Ser. 3 | DAR | <i>Garvan III</i> | 7056 | |
| B.135 | Avia | | 7057 | NN as seen on fin triangle. Conflicts with the Bf 109G 'Strela' |
| Bf 109G | Messerschmitt | <i>Strela</i> | 7057 | |
| Tu-2T | Tupolev | <i>Buhal</i> | 7058 | |
| He 42E | Heinkel | <i>Patitsa</i> | 7061 | |
| P.W.S. 26 | P.W.S. | <i>Polska Chuchuliga</i> | 7062 | |
| Fi 156C/D | Fieseler | <i>Drozd</i> | 7065 | Initially 7045 assigned (Feb. 1941) |
| Š.328 | Letov | <i>Vrana</i> | 7066 | |
| B.135 | Avia | | (7067) | Presumably officially assigned, actually not implemented |
| Bü 181 | Bücker | <i>Bestman</i> | 7071 | |
| He 60D | Heinkel | <i>Tyulen</i> | 7072 | |
| He 111H-16 | Heinkel | <i>Haynkel 111</i> | 7075 | |
| KB-11/11A | SFBK | <i>Fazan</i> | 7076 | |
| D.520 C1 | Dewoitine | <i>Devoatin</i> | 7077 | |
| UDv-520 | Dewoitine | <i>UDevoatin</i> | | Two-seater, dual-control local conversion. No confirmed NN available, but must have been different than the single-seat D.520's 7077 |
| UYak-9 (Yak-9V) | Yakovlev | | 7081 | Dual-control |

| Type | Maker | Code Name | NN | Notes |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|------|--|
| F.N. 315 | Nardi | <i>Kivi</i> | 7085 | Captured in 1943 |
| Fw 58B/C | Focke-Wulf | <i>Gäläb</i> | 7085 | Listed in post-war register as such. Possibly aircraft transformed for civilian use (passenger transport). Conflicts with the Nardi F.N. 315 |
| DAR-10A/F | DAR | <i>Bekas</i> | 7086 | |
| Yak-9D/M | Yakovlev | | 7087 | |
| Ull-2 | Ilyushin | | 7091 | Dual-control |
| Li-2P | Lisunov | | 7095 | |
| Ar 196A | Arado | <i>Akula</i> | 7096 | |
| Yak-9P/U/UT | Yakovlev | | 7097 | |
| UPe-2 | Petlyakov | <i>Prilep</i> | 7101 | Dual-control |
| Fw 189A | Focke-Wulf | <i>Tsiklop</i> | 7106 | Unofficial nick-name 'Oko' (Eye) |
| Yak-23 | Yakovlev | <i>Strela-1</i> | 7107 | |
| UMe-109 | Messerschmitt | <i>UStrela</i> | 7111 | Two-seater, dual-control local conversion |
| LAZ-8 | Lazarov | | 7115 | Post-war design, prototype, first flight in 1949 |
| MiG-15/15bis | Mikoyan&Gurevich | <i>Strela-2</i> | 7117 | |
| Po-2 | Polikarpov | <i>Kanarche</i> | 7121 | |
| Po-2L | Polikarpov | <i>Kanarche</i> | 7124 | |
| Yak-17UTI | Yakovlev | <i>Baba Nasta</i> | 7127 | Unusual for a two-seat trainer to have an NN ending with 7, denoting a fighter |
| Yak-11 | Yakovlev | | 7131 | |
| Yak-12B/P | Yakovlev | | 7135 | Also built in licence in Bulgaria, at "Zavod-14" (Factory-14), located in Lovech |
| MiG-17PF | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7137 | |
| MiG-17F/Lim-5 | Mikoyan&Gurevich PZL Mielec | | 7138 | Lim-5 is the Polish licence of the MiG-17F |
| P.43A | PZL | <i>Chayka</i> | 7139 | Entered service in 1939 |
| Ull-10 | Ilyushin | | 7141 | Dual-control |
| MiG-15UTI/ CS-102 | Mikoyan&Gurevich/Aero | <i>Sparka</i> | 7151 | |
| Il-28 | Ilyushin | | 7155 | As bomber aircraft, the NN should have ended in 8. |
| Ull-28 | Ilyushin | | 7156 | Dual-control. Unusual for a trainer to have an NN ending with 6. |
| Il-14/G/Av-14P/T/ VEB-14P | Ilyushin/Avia/VEB | | 7160 | The first known NN that ends with a 0. As transport aircraft, it should have ended in 5. |
| MiG-19S | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7200 | Probably start of a new numbering system |
| MiG-19P | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7201 | |
| Mi-4/A/VM | Mil | | 7202 | |
| Mi-1/SM-1 | Mil/PZL-Świdnik | | 7203 | |
| MiG-19PM | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7205 | |
| Il-28R | Ilyushin | | 7206 | |
| MiG-17 | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7207 | |
| L-200D | Let | | 7208 | Called <i>Morava</i> |
| L-29 | Aero | <i>Delfin</i> | 7209 | |
| Mi-2 | Mil/PZL-Świdnik | | 7212 | |
| MiG-21U | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7266 | |
| MiG-21F-13 | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7274 | |
| MiG-21PF | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7276 | |
| MiG-21PFM | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7294 | |
| MiG-21M | Mikoyan&Gurevich | | 7296 | |

Note: In the late 1950s, about when the MiG-19 entered service, the category definitions must have changed. It is possible that the entire category system was reset and started anew, with all newly introduced aircraft types being assigned subsequently increasing numbers: 7200= MiG-19S, 7201=MiG-19P, 7202=Mil Mi-4 helicopter, etc. For example, the registration number of the MiG-19P fighter, 7201, originally would mean trainer. There were large gaps in this new series of registration numbers. In the top area of the triangle the last (one, or two) digits of the construction number were written, which was not necessarily the complete number written on the fuselage nose. For example, MiG-21F-13, serial (nose) number 719, had the following NN: 9/7274.

In the late 1960s, the whole system was changed again. From then on, the aircraft type was identified by a two-digit number, called *Izdelie* (product) number (which appears to be the last two digits of the previous four-digit 72xx NN), and placed in the upper area of the triangle, while on the bottom area of the triangle the last (three, four, or five) digits of the aircraft's construction number were written (e.g., 95021 for a particular MiG-21UM photographed wearing the new roundel type marking). A few examples of the new *Izdelie* (product) number: 54 for Su-22M4, 66 for MiG-21U (formerly 7266), 68 for MiG-21US, 69 for MiG-21UM, 74 for MiG-21F-13 (formerly 7274), 76 for MiG-21PF (formerly 7276), 94 for MiG-21PFM (formerly 7294), 94P for MiG-21P, 96 for MiG-21M (formerly 7296), 96F for MiG-21MF, etc. Thus, in the case of the aforementioned example, that MiG-21UM would be identified as 69/95021. This specific aircraft identification triangle is still in use today, albeit not on all aircraft types. For example, it is used on MiG-29, Su-25, or Mi-24 helicopter, but not on L-39, or Mi-8/17 helicopters. This is odd, as for example the L-39 entered service in 1986, while the MiG-29 in 1990.

Further clarification of this topic related to the jet era is outside the scope of this book.

Identified USAAF Losses and Damages, Considering the Wartime Territory of Kingdom of Bulgaria and the Eastern Area of Occupied Yugoslavia, 1943-1944 (compiled by Dénes Bernád)

| Date | A/C | S/N | Group | Squadron | Official Cause | Pilot | Crew's Fate | Crash Location | MACR | Note |
|------------|-------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--|---------------------------|----------------------------------|------|---|
| 01.08.1943 | B-24D | 42-40364 | 98 th BG | 343 rd BS | Shot down by E/A | Capt. James A. Gunn III Jr. | 8 x KIA, 1 x POW | Goin Dol (west of Tsaribrod) | 165 | "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (port side)/"The Pink Elephant" (starboard side)". Crew from the 389 th BG |
| 01.08.1943 | B-24D | 41-11840 | 98 th BG | 343 rd BS | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. Julian T. Darlington | 6 x POW, 4 x escaped | Suva Morava (near Vladichin Han) | 173 | "The Witch". Crew from the 389 th BG. Force landed near the border of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia following a running fight with enemy fighters. Four crewmembers evaded and joined with Yugoslav partisans for almost a year. Pilot's middle name Trueheart |
| 01.08.1943 | B-24D | 41-23717 | 376 th BG | 330 th BS | Mid-air collision | 1 st Lt. Hugh R. Roper | 11 x KIA | Kokartsi Mahala (near Trán) | 334 | "Exterminator". Reportedly lost in a mid-air collision with B-24, S/N 41-24121, whilst returning from Ploesti |
| 01.08.1943 | B-24D | 41-24121 | 376 th BG | 330 th BS | Mid-air collision | 1 st Lt. Victor E. Olliffe | 8 x KIA, 3 x POW | Karakash Mahala (near Trán) | 462 | "Let 'er rip". While flying over the mountains of Macedonia, reportedly collided in a cloud bank with B-24, S/N 41-23717. Crashed in flames |
| 18.10.1943 | P-38G | 43-2552 | 82 nd FG | 97 th FS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. John Homan Jr. | KIA | Skopje | 990 | Missing after bombing a train and an ammunition dump in Skopje (Bulgaria). Buried in a park in Skopje |
| 21.10.1943 | P-38 | N/A | 82 nd FG | 95 th FS | Damaged by E/A | 1 st Lt. Douglas A. Neilson | OK | None | None | Fighter-bomber raid against Skopje (Bulgaria). Tail damaged |
| 14.11.1943 | P-38G | 42-13238 | 82 nd FG | 95 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Roy R. Hurst | MIA (KIA) | Debăr (Macedonia) | 1603 | "Hallock". Last contacted by radio while flying on single engine over mountains southwest of Skopje. |
| 24.11.1943 | B-24D | 42-41018 | 376 th BG | 514 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Philip V. Gore | 10 x POW (1 killed) | Sushewo (Macedonia) | 1298 | "Earthquake". Shot down by Bulgarian fighter NW of Strumitsa. One crew shot by local militia, 9 POW |
| 24.11.1943 | B-24J | 42-73137 | 376 th BG | 512 th BS | Shot down by E/A | Cpt. Dragisha M. Stanislavlyevich | 10 x POW | Bogumil (Macedonia) | 1300 | Shot down by Bulgarian fighters and crashed south of Skopje. Flown by mostly Yugoslavian crew (only one US crewmember aboard) |
| 24.11.1943 | P-38 | N/A | 82 nd FG | 97 th FS | Fuel starvation | 2 nd Lt. Edward E. Tinker | OK | Adriatic Sea | N/A | Ditched in the Adriatic Sea off the coast of Italy on its way back from Bulgaria |
| 10.12.1943 | P-38G | 42-12894 | 82 nd FG | 97 th FS | Mechanical failure | 2 nd Lt. Harry L. Downey Jr. | MIA (KIA) | Near Tirana (Albania) | 1480 | Lost in action, Bulgaria. Last seen near Kystendil |
| 10.12.1943 | P-38F | 41-7641 | 82 nd FG | 95 th FS | N/A | 2 nd Lt. George M. Magee | WIA | Pancrazio (Italy) | None | Returned on one engine, crashed and injured on landing at Pancrazio airfield, Italy. Personal recollection: shot down by E/A (wrongly listed as KIA) |
| 10.12.1943 | P-38G | 43-2468 | 82 nd FG | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | Italy | None | Destroyed in a crash in Italy. Pilot and crash details unknown (probably unrelated to the Sofia raid) |
| 20.12.1943 | B-24J | 42-73428 | 376 th BG | 515 th BS | Ramming Attack | 2 nd Lt. Robert W. Brown Jr. | 8 x KIA, 1 x MIA, 1 x POW | Dolni Pasarel | 1592 | "Big Nig". Crashed near Pancharevo (south-east of Sofia) |
| 20.12.1943 | P-38F | 43-2151 | 82 nd FG | 96 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. George M. Mitchell | POW | Dolni Pasarel | 1600 | Location, about 15 miles (24 km) SW of Sofia |
| 20.12.1943 | P-38G | 43-2413 | 82 nd FG | 97 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Edward E. Tinker | POW | Dolni Pasarel | 1599 | Location, 10 to 15 miles (16 to 24 km) SSW of Sofia |
| 20.12.1943 | P-38G | 43-2532 | 82 nd FG | 97 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. John W. McLendon | POW | Dolni Pasarel | 1601 | Location, 10 to 15 miles (16 to 24 km) SSW of Sofia |

| Date | A/C | S/N | Group | Squadron | Official Cause | Pilot | Crew's Fate | Crash Location | MACR | Note |
|------------|-------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|---|--------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|---|
| 10.01.1944 | B-17F | 42-5811 | 2 nd BG | 20 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Thomas P. Finch | 7 x KIA, 3 x POW | Kladnitsa | 1824 | "Ready Teddy"-The Last of Itsbitichis" |
| 10.01.1944 | B-17F | 41-24366 | 2 nd BG | 42 nd BS | Damaged by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Michael 'Mike' Miller | 1 x KIA, 5 x WIA, 4 x OK | None | 15078 | "K.O.". Returned heavily damaged by E/A. KIA was T/Sgt. Berton G. Hanson, upper turret gunner. A/C S/N might be wrong (given as such by 2 nd BG diary). Other S/N 42-29584 |
| 10.01.1944 | B-17F | 42-5170 | 99 th BG | 34 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Dale E. Shupe | 1 x KIA, 9 x POW | Radibosh | 1819 | Missing in action 11 miles (17.6 km) W from Sofia |
| 10.01.1944 | P-38G | 43-2458 | 14 th FG | 48 th FS | Shot down by E/A | Capt. George E. Richards | KIA | Gălbăvoști | 1816 | Conflicting info: S/N 43-2458 also listed with 97 th FS, 82 nd FG, on 14 Jan. 1944, damaged during taxing, Foggia |
| 10.01.1944 | P-38 | N/A | 14 th FG | 48 th FS | Enemy aircraft | Lt. Melvin T. Waldrop | OK | San Severo a/f | None | Pilot nursed his plane back with one engine shot out in air combat. Lt. Waldrop died only 13 days later, KIA in Italy. |
| 10.01.1944 | P-38 | N/A | 14 th FG | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | None | Crashed upon return on base in Italy (same as above?) |
| 10.01.1944 | P-47D | 42-75006 | 325 th FG | 319 th FS | Mechanical fault | 2 nd Lt. Beverly E. Miller | MIA (KIA) | Adriatic Sea | 2061 | Crashed in south Adriatic Sea, returning from Bulgaria, after his engine quit (or was damaged) |
| 24.01.1944 | B-17F | 42-30490 | 301 st BG | 352 nd BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. Albert D. Romans | 9 x POW | Mitrovitsa area | 1992 | Shot down by flak over Bulgaria. |
| 24.01.1944 | B-17F | 42-5340 | 99 th BG | 347 th BS | Missing in Action | 2 nd Lt. Michael E. McDonnell | 6 x WIA, 4 x OK (POW) | Trstenik (Serbia) | 1991 | MIA in a raid on Sofia |
| 24.01.1944 | B-17F | 42-5411 | 2 nd BG | 96 th BS | Damaged by E/A, Fuel exhausted | 2 nd Lt. Warren Lins | 10 x POW (1 x WIA) | Albania (on a beach) | 1988 | "Shady Lady". Lost during mission to Bulgaria. Last seen 34 miles (55 km) from Sofia. Low on fuel, crash landed on the beach in Albania. S/Sgt. Walter Nies (an ethnic German) killed at the POW camp <i>Szilag Luft VI</i> in Germany by a guard |
| 24.01.1944 | B-17F | 42-5836 | 2 nd BG | 49 th BS | Falling bombs | 2 nd Lt. Thomas J. Grissom | 4 x KIA, 6 x POW | Skopje | 1993 | "Hot Cock". Lost during mission to Bulgaria, struck by falling bombs. Crashed 35 kilometres north of Skopje |
| 24.01.1944 | B-17 | N/A | 2 nd BG | 429 th BS | Damaged by E/A | N/A | 1 x KIA, 2 x WIA, 7 x OK | None | None | Damaged during mission to Bulgaria, returned. 2 nd Lt. Glenn N. Hodges killed by 20 mm cannon shell |
| 24.01.1944 | B-17G | 42-31463 | 2 nd BG | 96 th BS | Damaged by E/A, Fuel exhausted | 2 nd Lt. Victor 'Vic' Brockman | 10 x OK | Adriatic Sea | None | Lost during mission to Bulgaria. Last seen 14 miles (22.5 km) from Sofia. Ditched 55 miles (88.5 km) north-east of Bari. Crew picked up by British ship ("the worst mission in history for the Group") |
| 24.01.1944 | B-17F | 42-29515 | 2 nd BG | 96 th BS | Fuel exhausted | 2 nd Lt. Robert Willis | 10 x OK | Adriatic Sea | None | "Wolf Pack". Lost during mission to Bulgaria. Ditched on 56th mission 24 miles (38.5 km) NE of Bari. Crew picked up by British rescue ship |
| 24.01.1944 | B-17F | 42-29602 | 2 nd BG | 20 th BS | Fuel exhausted | 2 nd Lt. Charles R. Watkins | 2 x WIA, 8 x OK | Adriatic Sea | None | "Evil Eye Egbert". Lost during mission to Bulgaria. Ditched one mile off coast of Bari on its 63rd mission. Crew rescued by two small Italian boats |
| 24.01.1944 | B-17F | 42-29645 | 2 nd BG | 49 th BS | Fuel exhausted | 2 nd Lt. Charles McCrary | 10 x OK | Adriatic Sea | None | "Wiley Witch". Lost during mission to Bulgaria. Lost a propeller. Ditched one mile east of Bari on its 77th mission. Crew rescued |
| 24.01.1944 | B-24H | 42-52148 | 450 th BG | 720 th BS | Damaged by collision | 2 nd Lt. Gerald French | 10 x OK | None | None | "Liberal Lady", was rammed by a <i>Luftwaffe</i> Bf 109G. Returned with right stabilizer and rudder damaged by collision. Lost on 25.02.1944 |
| 24.01.1944 | B-24H | 42-7743 | 450 th BG | 720 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Ronald R. Whitehead | 1 x KIA, 10 x POW | Skopje area (actually Albania?) | 2065 | "Miss Temptation". Lost during mission to Skopje. Attacked by ten to fifteen German 'ME-109' and 'FW-190' fighters over Bulgaria. Pilot MIA. Surviving crew captured by the Germans |

| Date | A/C | S/N | Group | Squadron | Official Cause | Pilot | Crew's Fate | Crash Location | MACR | Note |
|------------|-------|-----------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|------|--|
| 24.01.1944 | P-38G | 43-2501 | 82 nd FG | 97 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Robert E. Schultz | POW | Skopje area | 2041 | Plane coded CQ, last seen near Sofia. Claimed by JG 27, 30 miles (48 km) NE of Skopje |
| 24.01.1944 | P-38G | 43-2123 | 82 nd FG | 96 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. Thomas M. Judd | POW | Skopje area | 2040 | Shot down by IV/JG 27 over Central Macedonia |
| 30.03.1944 | B-17G | 42-31683 | 2 nd BG | 20 th BS | Mid-air collision | 2 nd Lt. Leroy P. Rigney | 10 x KIA | Kosharevo | 3364 | Bulgarian fighter pilot claims it shot down (fighter also severely damaged by flying debris) |
| 30.03.1944 | B-17G | 42-31851 | 2 nd BG | 20 th BS | Mid-air collision | 1 st Lt. Fred O. Wickham | 10 x KIA | Kosharevo | 3370 | Same Bulgarian fighter pilot claims it shot down (fighter also severely damaged by flying debris) |
| 30.03.1944 | B-17F | 42-30465 | 301 st BG | 419 th BS | Mechanical fault | 1 st Lt. William C. Miller | 10 x POW | Uleine (?) | 3714 | "Vagabond". Lost during mission to Bulgaria (at Uleine?, 36 miles/58 km of Sofia) |
| 30.03.1944 | B-24H | 42-52519 | 450 th BG | 723 rd BS | Unknown | 2 nd Lt. Charles W. Clark | 10 x MIA | Mediterranean | 3696 | "Little Lady Joyce". MIA in raid on Sofia. Last seen at 08:50 in cloudy weather |
| 30.03.1944 | P-38G | 42-13452 | 14 th FG | 37 th FS | Unknown | 1 st Lt. Charles C. Townsend | MIA (KIA) | N/A | 3692 | Lost during mission to Bulgaria (became separated from his squadron, crashed in Plachkovitsa Mountain, Macedonia) |
| 05.04.1944 | B-17G | 42-31182 | 301 st BG | 419 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Jess W. Coppedge | 10 x POW | Kule Mahala | 3882 | Mission to Rumania |
| 15.04.1944 | B-24G | 42-78186 | 460 th BG | 761 st BS | Shot down by E/A | Lt. Robert Meyer | 1 x POW, 9 x Evaded | Chichevats (Serbia) | 4384 | "Lucky Strike". Mission to Rumania. Shot down by Bf 109G |
| 15.04.1944 | P-38J | 42-104102 | 14 th FG | 37 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. John C. Ingram Jr. | KIA | Trästenik | 4371 | Reported as crashed in Hungary. Actually crashed near Ruse; 1,5 km NE of Trästenik. No Bulgarian interference |
| 15.04.1944 | P-38J | 42-67965 | 14 th FG | N/A | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Joseph A. Garrity | POW | Sandrowo | 4368 | Mission to Rumania. Crashed near Ruse. No Bulgarian interference. POW at Camp Shumen |
| 15.04.1944 | P-38J | 42-104151 | 14 th FG | N/A | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. Robert G. Zimmerman | POW | Pirgovo | 4378 | Reported as crashed in Hungary on 21 April. Actually crashed near Ruse. No Bulgarian interference. POW at Camp Shumen |
| 17.04.1944 | P-51B | 42-106479 | 31 st FG | 309 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Raymond L. Dameron | KIA | Drugan | 4230 | Plane coded WZ-H. Crashed near Radomir |
| 06.05.1944 | B-24H | 42-52282 | 455 th BG | 742 nd BS | N/A | 1 st Lt. William K. King | 7 x KIA, 3 x POW | Voynitsa (Kula) | 5459 | "The Cowtown Blonde". Mission to Rumania |
| 18.05.1944 | P-38J | 42-104063 | 14 th FG | 49 th FS | Hit by AA | 2 nd Lt. Paul J. Wingert | KIA | Smochevo (S of Dupnitsa) | 5042 | Mission to Rumania. On return from target. Last spotted above Divaslat(?), probably Diva Slatina, Bulgaria. Bailed out from 10,000 feet (3048 m) after a flak hit. Reported as killed |
| 18.05.1944 | B-17G | 42-31825 | 463 rd BG | 775 th BS | N/A | 1 st Lt. Louis W. Menge | 10 x MIA | Mezdra | 5791 | Mission to Rumania. The return flight from Ploesti to Foggia crossed over Orekhova. Dropped out of formation and was not seen again |
| 18.05.1944 | B-17G | 42-106991 | 99 th BG | 347 th BS | Hit by AA | 2 nd Lt. Herschel L. McLain | 8 x KIA, 2 x POW, 1 x OK | Čapljina, near Mostar | 5066 | "Daisy Mae". Mission to Rumania. Returned just before reaching the target, with full bombload. |
| 18.05.1944 | B-24J | 42-64347 | 455 th BG | 743 rd BS | Hit by AA | 2 nd Lt. Thomas J. Markham | 10 x POW (1 x killed) | Byala Slatina/Tarnak | 5057 | "BOOM-ERANG BETSY". Hit by flak over Rumania, still made the bombing run, crashed after 1 hr. 45 min. flight. Pilot bailed out last, was captured the following day. Officially reported "shot while escaping", reportedly shot in custody, mistaken for a spy |
| 18.05.1944 | B-24H | 42-52351 | 459 th BG | 756 th BS | N/A | 2 nd Lt. Harold W. Helfrich | 2 x KIA, 5 x POW, 3 x OK | 10 km W of Kičevo | 5830 | "Satan's Shuttlebus". Mission to Ploesti, Rumania. Lost to unknown circumstances. Hit 'Dva Kamena' mountain peak west of Kičevo |

| Date | A/C | S/N | Group | Squadron | Official Cause | Pilot | Crew's Fate | Crash Location | MACR | Note |
|------------|-------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|------------------|--|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|---|
| 18.05.1944 | B-24H | 42-52355 | 460 th BG | 763 rd BS | Shot down by E/A | Lt. Charles L. Stevenson | 2 x KIA, 8 x OK | Oruglica | 5044 | 'Agony Wagon'. Mission to Rumania, attacked by 9 Bf 109s 1/2 hr. after leaving target, 2 eng. destroyed, all but one crew bailed out. S/Sgt. Dunn killed while hanging on his chute |
| 18.05.1944 | B-24H | 41-29246 | 454 th BG | 738 th BS | N/A | Flt. Of. David A. Millington | 10 x POW | Between Nivokaz and Molich (YU) | 5067 | "Tuff Nut Tessie". Mission to Ploesti, Rumania. Lost to unknown reason. "Plane was seen fall back from formation" |
| 18.05.1944 | B-24H | 42-52253 | 455 th BG | 743 rd BS | Engine trouble | 1 st Lt. Ernest F. Turner | 10 x POW | Podgorica (Montenegro) | 4843 | Crashed near the a/f of Podgorica |
| 18.05.1944 | B-24G | 42-78081 | 455 th BG | 743 rd BS | N/A | Capt. Don M. Rawls | 2 x KIA, 8 x POW | Gabrovnik (Macedonia) | 4842 | Mission to Rumania. Two men executed by Bulgarian militia |
| 10.06.1944 | P-38J | 43-28704 | 1 st FG | 71 st FS | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. Carl C. Hoenshell | KIA | Dragoman | 5634 | Mission to Rumania. On the way home, he and 2 nd Lt. Herbert 'Stub' Hatch Jr. were caught without ammunition. Received post-mortem the Distinguished Service Cross |
| 11.06.1944 | P-38J | 43-28636 | 82 nd FG | 95 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Leonard Wood | POW | Radomir | 5756 | Mission to Rumania. Lost on return from target. Location, 20 miles (32 km) west of Sofia |
| 11.06.1944 | P-38J | 43-28678 | 82 nd FG | 95 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Dan H. Wylie | POW | Radomir | 5759 | Mission to Rumania. Lost on return from target. Location, 20 miles (32 km) west of Sofia |
| 11.06.1944 | P-51B | 43-7024 | 52 nd FG | 2 nd FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Joseph F. Riley | KIA | Botevgrad | 5777 | Riley shot down in air battle over Bulgaria, while flying P-51B, QP-F |
| 11.06.1944 | P-51B | N/A | 52 nd FG | 2 nd FS | Damaged by E/A | 1 st Lt. James E. Hoffman | OK | None | None | Badly damaged in air combat over Bulgaria. Managed to return to Madna air base. |
| 11.06.1944 | B-24G | 42-78260 | 461 st BG | 767 th BS | Hit by AA | 1 st Lt. Robert L. Heald | 10 x POW | Mezdra | 5641 | Mission to Giurgiu (Rumania). Last seen near target |
| 11.06.1944 | B-24H | 42-52458 | 461 st BG | 764 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. Robert J. Heffling | 11 x evaded | Rashka (Serbia) | 6307 | "Chippeddall" |
| 11.06.1944 | B-24H | 41-29251 | 451 st BG | 724 th BS | N/A | 2 nd Lt. Charles R. Haun | 2 x KIA, 8 x POW | Ruse | 5668 | "She Hasta". Mission to Rumania |
| 11.06.1944 | B-24H | 42-64500 | 455 th BG | 743 rd BS | Fuel exhausted | 2 nd Lt. Earl W. Brawninger | 1 x KIA, 9 x POW | Nikopol | 5771 | "Dazzlin' Dutchess and the Ten Dukes". Mission to Rumania. Left formation en route to target after crew reported serious fuel leak. |
| 11.06.1944 | B-24H | 42-52671 | 484 th BG | 826 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Clarence B. Odle | 2 x KIA, 8 x POW | Ruse | 6014 | "Dream Girl". Shot down by fighters near "Rhsso" (i.e., Russe) |
| 11.06.1944 | B-24G | 42-78290 | 449 th BG | 716 th BS | Fuel exhausted | 2 nd Lt. James D. Gudger | 6 x KIA, 4 x POW | Blatets (near Kytustendil) | 6021 | Mission to Rumania. MACR no details on the aircraft's fate |
| 11.06.1944 | B-24H | 42-52684 | 484 th BG | 826 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. Lawrence Z. Rose | 7 x KIA, 3 x POW (1 died) | Okolo (Novgrad) | 6096 | Bombing mission to Giurgiu, Rumania. Near their target, the bomber was attacked by Bf 109s, which set it on fire over Novgrad. Pilot Lt. Lawrence Zeagler Rose dead on 26.07.1944 |
| 23.06.1944 | B-17F | 42-5951 | 97 th BG | 341 st BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Edwin O. Anderson | 1 x KIA, 6 x POW, 2 x OK | Suhozem (Plovdiv) | 6406 | "Opissonya". Mission to Rumania. The bombardier, 2 nd Lt. David R. Kingsley, was awarded posthumously with 'Medal of Honor'. |
| 23.06.1944 | B-17G | 42-37813 | 301 st BG | 32 nd BS | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. John G. Muirhead | 3 x KIA, 7 x POW | Berkovitsa | 16203 | Mission to Rumania. Crashed near Diva Slatina |
| 23.06.1944 | B-24H | 42-52678 | 484 th BG | 825 th BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. Charles O. Crane | 11 x POW | Pirot | None | Mission to Rumania. Direct hit by flak put out 3 engines. POWs sent to Camp Shumen |
| 23.06.1944 | B-24G | 42-52706 | 485 th BG | 829 th BS | Shot down by AA | Lt. Philip R. 'Bob' Bobier | 10 x POW | East of Tetovo (Macedonia) | 6176 | Mission to Rumania. Crashed into a mountain near Skopje after two engines failed. All crew bailed out, POW Shumen |

| Date | A/C | S/N | Group | Squadron | Official Cause | Pilot | Crew's Fate | Crash Location | MACR | Note |
|------------|-------|-----------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--|---------------------------|--|-------|--|
| 23.06.1944 | B-17G | 42-31622 | 97 th BG | 414 th BS | None | 1 st Lt. Jack de Haas | 2 x POW, 8 x OK | None | 6374 | Accidental bailout of two crewmembers: T/Sgt. George W. Fanning (radio operator/gunner) and S/Sgt. Henry E. Fretwell, Jr (left waist gunner), at 11:13, at 43-10N, 22-08E. Both POW. Aircraft returned to base |
| 23.06.1944 | P-51C | 42-103456 | 325 th FG | 318 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. David G. Hanson | POW | Pirot | None | "Hell's Belle's", No. 48. POW at Camp Shumen |
| 24.06.1944 | B-24G | 42-78190 | 376 th BG | 514 th BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. James B. Hampton | 2 x KIA, 9 x POW | Tutrakan (Turtucaia) area | 6765 | "Problem Child" Mission to Rumania. Crashed there? |
| 24.06.1944 | B-24J | 42-100259 | 98 th BG | 343 rd BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Wilson D. Stallings | 9 x KIA, 1 x MIA, 1 x POW | Panagyuritse | 6437 | Mission to Rumania |
| 24.06.1944 | B-24J | 42-73136 | 98 th BG | 344 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Roland E. Stumpff | 6 x POW, 4 x Other | Bregalnitsa (Macedonia) | 11265 | "Sky Wolf". Mission to Rumania |
| 24.06.1944 | B-24H | 41-28846 | 449 th BG | 717 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. Robert C. Anderson | 10 x POW | Samokov | 6403 | "Gidi-Gidi Boom-Boom". Shot down by enemy fighters 3 miles (4.8 km) S of Sofia on the return trip from Rumania |
| 24.06.1944 | B-24G | 42-78380 | 450 th BG | 722 nd BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Henry G. van Popering | 6 x POW, 4 x Other | Sitovo | 6365 | Three crewmembers missing in action. |
| 24.06.1944 | B-24H | 42-52547 | 376 th BG | 513 rd BS | Mechanical failure | 2 nd Lt. Melvin J. Rudd Jr. | 1 x KIA, 1 x MIA, 8 x POW | Konche (Macedonia) | 7130 | POWs ended in Camp Shumen |
| 24.06.1944 | B-24 | N/A | 450 th BG | 721 st BS | N/A | Lt. 'Jack' Gilday | OK | None | None | Mission to Ploesti (Rumania). Returned from western Bulgaria on two engines |
| 24.06.1944 | B-24 | N/A | 450 th BG | 721 st BS | N/A | Lt. White | 1 x WIA, rest OK | None | None | Mission to Ploesti (Rumania). Returned with both of his ship's vertical stabilizers shot away, plus a feathered engine |
| 24.06.1944 | B-24 | N/A | 98 th BG | 343 rd BS | Damaged by E/A | 2 nd Lt. Mac A. Blevins | 1 x KIA, 1 x WIA, 8 x OK | None | None | Aircraft No. 802, letter L. Returned to home base Fortunato Cesare damaged, with on-board gunner Serg. F. A. Murray dead and Staff Serg. A. J. Sharanko wounded |
| 28.06.1944 | B-24H | 42-52701 | 485 th BG | 828 th BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. John D. 'Dud' Crouchley, Jr. | 1 x KIA, 9 x POW | Perushitsa south | 6820 | Mission to Rumania. Because the autopilot was out of function, the pilot remained in the plane to provide safe bail out of his crew. Probably he died during the crash. Remains found and identified on 31 August 2018. MIA status reverted to KIA. Eight airmen were captured the same day. The co-pilot, 2 nd Lt. William J. Hays, survived five days alone in the mountains before being captured. Aircraft crashed near village of Churen, Plovdiv region |
| 03.07.1944 | B-24H | 42-95388 | 376 th BG | 512 th BS | Shot down by AA | 1 st Lt. George H. Hillman | 11 x POW | Oryahovo | 6363 | Mission to Rumania. Photo of crashed A/C in Bulgaria exists |
| 03.07.1944 | B-24H | 42-51157 | 376 th BG | 512 th BS | Shot down by E/A | 2 nd Lt. William R. Holgate | 10 x POW | Boychinovitsi | 6339 | Mission to Rumania. Lost over Bulgaria |
| 15.07.1944 | B-24G | 42-78323 | 459 th BG | 758 th BS | Shot down by AA | 1st Lt. Ray P. McLaughlin, Jr. | 7 x KIA, 3 x POW | Zajechar | 7058 | Hit by flak over Bor, right wing fell off, a/c went into spin and exploded |
| 15.07.1944 | B-24H | 42-95325 | 455 th BG | 742 nd BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. James Bush | 1 x KIA, 2 MIA, 7 x Other | Tsibur (Ferdinand) | 6896 | "Chiggebofumbie", is American Indian for "son of a bitch". Mission to Ploesti. Severely damaged by flak over the target. Officially lost at 'Tsibir', Bulgaria. All bailed out, one KIA, seven retrieved by Yugoslav partisans, two unknown |
| 15.07.1944 | B-24G | 42-78275 | 456 th BG | 745 th BS | Shot down by AA | 1 st Lt. Stanley Sagert | 10 x Escaped | Trebinje, 10 km E | 6908 | Mission to Rumania |
| 22.07.1944 | B-17G | 42-97725 | 97 th BG | 414 th BS | Shot down by AA | Maj. Floyd S. Cofer, Jr | 10 x Escaped | Suva mountains (south of Bela Palanka) | 6854 | Hit by flak over Ploesti. Near the Bulgarian border a single Bf 109 attacked and set engine no. 2 on fire. Crew bailed out in the vicinity of Bela Palanka. All rescued by Chetniks |

| Date | A/C | S/N | Group | Squadron | Official Cause | Pilot | Crew's Fate | Crash Location | MACR | Note |
|------------|-------|-----------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------|---|
| 22.07.1944 | B-24H | 42-51136 | 464 th BG | 776 th BS | Shot down by AA | Maj. Harold E. Blehm | 6 x KIA, 4 x POW | Pazardzhik north-west | 9716 | Mission to Rumania |
| 22.07.1944 | B-24H | 42-78343 | 98 th BG | 343 rd BS | Shot down by AA & E/A | 1 st Lt. Francis D. Puntenev | 1 x KIA, 6 x POW, 4 x Other | Lovetch | 7054 | Mission to Rumania. Tail number 07054. Shot down at 10:15 am. Flak fire hit aircraft, which started to burn (wing, left side of fuselage). Survivors reported being fired at by a German Bf 109 fighter. Surviving crew POW at Shumen |
| 22.07.1944 | B-24H | 42-94887 | 449 th BG | 716 th BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. William C. Rye | 10 x Escaped | East of Kragujevac | 6968 | 'No. 887'. Mission to Rumania. Hit by flak over the target, hit again over Bor. Crew was rescued by Yugoslav partisans |
| 22.07.1944 | B-24H | 42-78253 | 461 st BG | 765 th BS | Damaged by AA | 1 st Lt. Noble Taylor | 1 x KIA, 9 x OK | Torretta area | None | Crew bailed near the base when one engine was left. One airman (F/O Irving Smithkin) fatally injured while parachuting |
| 22.07.1944 | B-24H | 42-29313 | 461 st BG | 766 th BS | Damaged by AA | 1 st Lt. Turner L. Holmes | 10 x OK | Torretta area | None | "The Hottest ??? In Town!" Crew bailed near the base when aircraft ran out of fuel |
| 31.07.1944 | P-51D | 44-13516 | 31 st FG | 307 th FS | Undetermined | 2 nd Lt. Charles L. Jones | MIA (KIA) | Nikopol area | 7465 | Mission to Rumania. Lost to unknown cause SW of Nikopol. |
| 31.07.1944 | P-51D | 44-13364 | 325 th FG | 318 th FS | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. Bobbie L. Winn | POW | Stavetsi, Oryahovo | 7155 | Mission to Rumania |
| 31.07.1944 | B-24D | 42-72767 | 376 th BG | 513 th BS | Shot down by AA | 1 st Lt. William J. Paterick | 4 x KIA, 6 x POW | Bor SE (Serbia) | 7210 | Mission to Rumania |
| 10.08.1944 | B-17G | 44-6191 | 97 th BG | 342 nd BS | Damaged by E/A | Lt. George Tomovich | 3 x WIA, 7 x OK | Amendola (Italy) | None | Damaged in combat by three enemy fighters near Nish. Returned to base, where crash landed. Scrapped. |
| 10.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78320 | 376 th BG | 515 th BS | Shot down by AA | 1 st Lt. Donald E. Rigg | 10x POW | Pleven | 7185 | "The Penguin". Mission to Rumania |
| 10.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78464 | 376 th BG | 514 th BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. Craig G. Morrow | 10x POW | Pleven | 8087 | "Upsy Daisy". Mission to Rumania |
| 10.08.1944 | P-51D | 44-13436 | 325 th FG | 317 th FS | Mechanical failure | 2 nd Lt. Edward J. Isackson | KIA | Skopje, 40 km north | 7201 | Pilot's chute caught on the cockpit, he went down with the aircraft |
| 17.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78159 | 450 th BG | 720 th BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. Donald W. Gilbert | 2 x KIA, 9 x POW | Skopje | 7629/7635 | Mission to Rumania |
| 17.08.1944 | B-24J | 44-40489 | 376 th BG | 512 th BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. Henry V. Ford | 7 x KIA, 5 x POW | Vratsa | 7631/7637 | Mission to Rumania. Hit by AA over Ploesti |
| 17.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78206 | 376 th BG | 512 th BS | Shot down by AA | 2 nd Lt. James R. Mc-Connaughey | 10 x POW | Lom | 7634/7638 | "Desert Fury". Mission to Rumania |
| 17.08.1944 | B-24H | 42-50298 | 451 st BG | 727 th BS | Unknown | 2 nd Lt. James D. Young | 9 x POW | Zhostovo (Macedonia) | 7678 | "Dirty Gertie". Mission to Rumania |
| 17.08.1944 | P-51B | 42-106455 | 31 st FG | 308 th FS | Mechanical failure | 1 st Lt. Bernard A. Shipp | POW | Lom | 7864 | Mission to Rumania. Crashed at Lom, Bulgaria due to mechanical failure upon return from Ploesti mission. Pilot bailed out and became POW |
| 17.08.1944 | B-24J | 42-78504 | 454 th BG | 738 th BS | Shot down by AA | 1 st Lt. John D. Mason | 2 x KIA, 8 x POW | Mezdra | 7456 | "B.T.Q.". Mission to Rumania |
| 17.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78229 | 484 th BG | 827 th BS | Shot down by AA | Lt. Philip E. Wagner | 10 x POW | Prizren 30 km NNE (Kosovo) | 7682 | Mission to Rumania |
| 17.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78182 | 454 th BG | 738 th BS | Shot down by AA | 1 st Lt. Joe A. Crawford | 2 x KIA, 7 x POW | Berkovitsa | 7628/7632 | 'Rough Rider'. Mission to Rumania |
| 17.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78203 | 456 th BG | 745 th BS | Shot down by AA | 1 st Lt. J. (IO) J. Walker | 4 x POW, 5 x Other | Breznik | 7672 | Mission to Rumania |
| 17.08.1944 | B-24J | 44-40615 | 450 th BG | 720 th BS | Shot down by AA | 1 st Lt. Brice C. Diedrick | 9 x KIA, 1 x POW | Skopje area | 7951 | "Ruff 'N' Reddy" |
| 18.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78295 | 459 th BG | 758 th BS | Mechanical failure | Cpt. Allie W. Peoples, Jr. | 9 x POW | Oryahovo | 7693 | "Hot 'N Bothered". Mission to Rumania |
| 19.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-99858 | 98 th BG | 343 rd BS | Shot down by AA | 1 st Lt. Raymond L. Baker | 1 x KIA, 10 x POW | Oryahovo | 15306 | Mission to Rumania |

| Date | A/C | S/N | Group | Squadron | Official Cause | Pilot | Crew's Fate | Crash Location | MACR | Note |
|------------|-------|----------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---|------------------|--------------------------|------|---|
| 26.08.1944 | B-24H | 41-28862 | 455 th BG | 743 rd BS | Shot down by AA | Lt. Col. Hugh R. Graff | 7 x KIA, 5 x POW | Mitrovitsa area (Kosovo) | 8086 | Mission to Rumania. Reported lost over Yugoslavia. The extra man aboard was an army photographer (POW) |
| 26.08.1944 | B-24H | 42-52635 | 484 th BG | 825 th BS | N/A | 2 nd Lt. Wallace LeMay | 4 x POW, 6 x OK | None | 7955 | Mission to Rumania. Both waist gunners, ball turret and tail gunners bailed out due to non-combat damage to engine No. 3. Position 43-54N, 24-38E. Returned to base in Italy |
| 26.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78240 | 455 th BG | 742 nd BS | Shot down by E/A | 1 st Lt. Edwin C. Kieselbach | 6 x KIA, 3 x POW | Vratnitsa (Macedonia) | 9718 | "Our Love". Mission to Rumania. Crashed high in the Sharr mountains, above Vratnitsa. Surviving crewmembers POW |
| 26.08.1944 | B-24G | 42-78332 | 461 st BG | 766 th BS | Fuel exhausted | 2 nd Lt. Howard O. Wilson | 11 x POW | Cetinje (Montenegro) | 7962 | Reportedly ran out of fuel, crew bailed out |
| 26.08.1944 | P-51B | N/A | 332 nd FG | 99 th FS | Mechanical failure | 2 nd Lt. Henry A. Wise Jr. | POW | Nefela (Vratsa region) | None | 'Buzz' no.: A2-7. Mission to Rumania. Black 'Tuskegee' airman. Officially forced to bail out when oil pressure dropped and engine started to smoke heavily. Landed near 'Krujino' |
| 26.08.1944 | P-38J | 43-28795 | 82 nd FG | 97 th FS | Unknown | Flight Officer Melvin L. Fernow | OK | Manfredonia (Italy) | None | Crashed during force landing (possibly already damaged). Pilot died on 22.09.1944, during mission to Germany |
| 31.08.1944 | P-38J | 44-23196 | 1 st FG | 71 st FS | Unknown | Lt. Jesse Rae Dorris | KIA | Niš, 20 miles SE | 8348 | Flying cover for B-24s going to Popești-Leordeni airfield, near Bucharest to pick up POWs (Operation 'Reunion') |
| 10.11.1944 | B-24J | 42-51813 | 376 th BG | 514 th BS | Lost orientation | Lt. Tanvas | N/A | None | None | No. 813 on nose. Pathfinder aircraft. Lost its way and landed on Vrazhdebna airfield at 20:00. Main wheel damaged. Returned to combat mission with 376 th BG on 1 March 1945 |

Note: This list of losses is not exhaustive, as its purpose was only to show the number and type of aircraft that crashed on Bulgarian territory on a certain date, or were damaged in Bulgarian airspace (therefore, the first two columns are relevant for this exercise). Further research, particularly into the details of lost aircraft and those damaged in combat that returned to their home base, is encouraged. With a few exceptions, the Author did not attempt to match claims with losses, in either direction, leaving this exercise to those who wish to deep-dive into this challenging topic (possibly using the available MACRs and other US and Bulgarian sources).

The Author would like to thank ret. Col. Prof. Stanimir Stanev for his help.



B-24H, S/N 42-95388, crashed near Oryahovo, on 3 July 1944, after being hit by flak fire. For details, see page 256.

Official List of Bulgarian Fighter Pilots, Ranked According to the Confirmed Number of Victories and Victory Points Obtained During World War 2

| No. | Rank | First, middle and last name | Unit | Downed aircraft* | Damaged aircraft** | Efficiently attacked aircraft*** | Total number of victory points (Source 1) | Total number of victory points (Source 2) | Air Combats | Combat Sorties |
|-----|--------------------|--------------------------------|--|------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|-------------|----------------|
| 1. | <i>Poruchik</i> | Stoyan Iliev Stoyanov | C/O 682. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 4 | 4 | 1 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 35 |
| 2. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Petar Anghelov Bochev | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 3 | 4 | 0 | 13 | 13 | 10 | 16 |
| 3. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Marin Anghelov Tsvetkov | 672. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 4 | 2 | 10 | 8 | 13 | 29 |
| 4. | <i>Kapitan</i> | Chudomir Mil. Toplodolski | C/O 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 3 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 15 |
| 5. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Ivan Nenov Bonev | 682. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 3 | 1 | 0 | 8 | 8 | 9 | 20 |
| 6. | <i>Poruchik</i> | Nedelcho D. Bonchev | C/O 652. Yato, 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 2 | 1 | 0 | 8 | | | |
| 7. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Petar Kirov Petrov | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 2 | 1 | 1 | 8 | | | |
| 8. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Gencho Dimitrov Ivanov | 692. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 3 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 7 | 13 | 28 |
| 9. | <i>Poruchik</i> | Boris Velyanov Damev | 672. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 0 | 4 | 0 | 7 | 7 | 18 | 39 |
| 10. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | Aleksandar A. Petkovski | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 0 | 4 | 0 | 6 | 6 | 13 | 31 |
| 11. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Hristo Vasilev Kostakev | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 2 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 6 | 11 | 30 |
| 12. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Mihail Grigorov Georgiev | 672. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 5 | 9 | 11 |
| 13. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | Tsvetko Markov Zagorski | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 21 |
| 14. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Evgheni G. Tonchev | 682. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 1 | 0 | 5 | | | |
| 15. | <i>Kapitan</i> | Krastyo Ant. Atanasov | C/O Fighter School, C/O 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 0 | 4 | 0 | 5 | 8 | 13 | 15 |
| 16. | <i>Feldfebel</i> | Hristo Tsankov Koev | 682. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 6 | 14 |
| 17. | <i>Poruchik</i> | Lyuben Zahar. Kondakov | C/O 692. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 12 |
| 18. | <i>Poruchik</i> | Asen Dimitrov Kovachev | C/O 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> (from late April 1944) | 0 | 2 | 2 | 4 | | | |
| 19. | <i>Poruchik</i> | Nikolay G. Yordanov | C/O 672. Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 18 |
| 20. | <i>Kapitan</i> | Nikolay S. Boshnakov | C/O 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> (until late April 1944) | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4**** | | | |
| 21. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Vladimir Aleksandrov | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4 | | | |
| 22. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Hristo Georgiev Krastev | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 16 |
| 23. | <i>Poruchik</i> | Dimitar Svetozarov Spisarevski | C/O of a Yato, 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| 24. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Stefan N. Marinopolski | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | | | |
| 25. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Georgi R. Kyumyurdzhiev | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 26. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Dimitar A. Bachvarov | 1/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | | | |
| 27. | <i>Poruchik</i> | Zemen Dimitrov | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | | | |
| 28. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Georgi Hr. Gochev | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | | | |
| 29. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Emil Pant. Balgaranov | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | | | |
| 30. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Ivan T. Ivanov | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | | | |
| 31. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Emil G. Stoitsev | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 | | | |
| 32. | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Viktor D. Atanasov | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | | | |

| No. | Rank | First, middle and last name | Unit | Downed aircraft* | Damaged aircraft** | Efficiently attacked aircraft*** | Total number of victory points (Source 1) | Total number of victory points (Source 2) | Air Combats | Combat Sorties |
|-----|--------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|-------------|----------------|
| 33. | Kandidat ofiser | Veselin Stoev Terziev | 2/6. Orlyak | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | | | |
| 34. | Feldfebel | Dako P. Dakov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| 35. | Podporuchik | Todor Nikolov Rozev | 672. Yato, 3/6. Orlyak | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 14 | 30 |
| 36. | Podofiser | Kiril Hr. Stoyanov | N/A | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 15 | 28 |
| 37. | Poruchik | Vasil P. Shishkov | 1/6. Orlyak | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | | | |
| 38. | Podporuchik | Hristo Iv. Petrov | 2/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | | | |
| 39. | Poruchik | Nikola R. Kolev | 4/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | | | |
| 40. | Poruchik | Petar D. Manolev | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 18 |
| 41. | Podporuchik | Nikola Valchev Nikolov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | | | |
| 42. | Poruchik | Viktor Evst. Pavlov | C/O 642. Yato, 2/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | | | |
| 43. | Podporuchik | Nikola Nachev | 2/6. Orlyak | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | | | |
| 44. | Podofiser | Georgi N. Atanasov | 2/6. Orlyak | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | | | |
| 45. | Kandidat ofiser | Stefan Takov Iliev | 1/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 46. | Poruchik | Bogdan Yordanov Iliev | 1/6. Orlyak | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | | | |
| 47. | Podporuchik | Dimitar D. Sotirov | Fighter School | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 12 | 16 |
| 48. | Podporuchik | Asen P. Gigov | 2/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | | | 8 |
| 49. | Podporuchik | Ivan T. Stefanov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 5 |
| 50. | Feldfebel shkolnik | Tsvetan D. Gruiev | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 18 |
| 51. | Kapitan | Marin Grozev Petrov | C/O of 1/6. & 4/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | | | |
| 52. | Poruchik | Zahari I. Planinski | 4/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | | | |
| 53. | Podofiser | Toshko I. Hristov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 10 | 28 |
| 54. | Podporuchik | Mihail Uzunov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 16 |
| 55. | Feldfebel | Yoto Petkov Kamenov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 13 | 21 |
| 56. | Feldfebel | Nikola Hr. Kralichev | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 21 |
| 57. | Podofiser | Dimitar Rachev Somov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 9 | 27 |
| 58. | Feldfebel | Stefan V. Konzov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 17 | 23 |
| 59. | Podofiser | Nikola Takov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 26 |
| 60. | Podporuchik | Kiril Iliev | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 6 |
| 61. | Feldfebel | Stanush Stanushev | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 12 |
| 62. | Podporuchik | Panyu A. Kraevski | 2/6. Orlyak | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | | | |
| 63. | Feldfebel | Atanas Mateev (actually Matev) | 2/6. Orlyak | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 9 | 15 |
| 64. | Podporuchik | Mihail Koytsev Barov | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 28 |
| 65. | Podporuchik | Nayden Stoyanov | 2/6. Orlyak | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | | | |
| 66. | Podporuchik | Georgi A. Georgiev | 3/6. Orlyak | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 28 |

| No. | Rank | First, middle and last name | Unit | Downed aircraft* | Damaged aircraft** | Efficiently attacked aircraft*** | Total number of victory points (Source 1) | Total number of victory points (Source 2) | Air Combats | Combat Sorties |
|-------|--------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|-------------|----------------|
| N/A | <i>Poruchik</i> | Dimităr P. Vuychev | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 3 | 9 |
| N/A | <i>Kapitan</i> | Boris K. Teofilov | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| N/A | <i>Poruchik</i> | Ivan D. Ivanov | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 3 | 5 | 16 |
| N/A | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Evgheeni G. Nikolov | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 2 | 5 | 12 |
| N/A | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Luka Y. Obreykov | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| N/A | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Pavel E. Pavlov | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 9 | 12 |
| N/A | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Mitru S. Disov | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| N/A | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Nedyu K. Nedev | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 9 | 16 |
| N/A | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Yordan F. Petrov | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 8 | 16 |
| N/A | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Radoslav D. Raykov | 4/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| N/A | <i>Podporuchik</i> | Stefan Hr. Stoyanov | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 3 | 7 |
| N/A | <i>Feldfel</i> | Yordan S. Todorov | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 1 | 5 |
| N/A | <i>Feldfel</i> | Hristo Kr. Takev | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| N/A | <i>Feldfel</i> | Stefan N. Stefanov | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| N/A | <i>Podofiser</i> | Petar G. Dobrovolski | 4/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| N/A | <i>Podofiser</i> | Radoslav N. Drenski | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| N/A | <i>Podofiser</i> | Ivan M. Somlev | 3/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| N/A | <i>Podofiser</i> | Nedyalko A. Koledov | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| N/A | <i>Poruchik</i> | Dimităr A. Dimitrov | 2/6. <i>Orlyak</i> | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 0 | 2 | 15 |
| Total | | | | 46 | 70 | 24 | 213 | | | |

Sources:

1, Personal data, unit and air victories (first eight columns) from: лист на пилотите изгребители, подредени според броя на победите им, признати със заповед No. 78/28.12.1944 г. (List of fighter pilots, ranked according to the number of victories recognized by order No.78/28.12.1944), published in *Vestnik VVS*, Izdanie na b. "*Balgarska Armiya*", Broj 18, Oktombri '97 (No. 18, October 1997), pages 6-7 (ISSN 0861-850, X)

2, Data for no. of air victories, combat sorties and air fights (last three columns) from: Stoyanov, Gen. Stoyan: '*Nie Branahme Tebe, Sofiya*' ('We Defend You, Sofia), 'Eăr Grup 2000' Publ., Sofia, Bulgaria, 2011, pages 250-253 [List of 36th (ex-3/6.) Fighter Group pilots, their achievements from 1 August 1943 to 1 May 1946', ranks given as in 1946]

Notes:

* 3 victory points awarded for a downed bomber, 1 victory point for a downed fighter

** 2, or 1 victory points awarded for a damaged bomber

*** 0 victory point awarded

**** plus 2 more added by hand in the 2/6. *Orlyak*'s combat diary, compiled post-war (thus unofficial)

Author's note: names and ranks in this official list are reproduced *ad verbatim*, as published, including the obvious errors and omissions

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One of the few original wartime prints in the Author's personal collection that depict a Bf 109G shows 'Red 3' on Bozhurishte airfield, in October 1944.



Bozhurishte 1944 20. Андрей

Bulgarian FIGHTER COLOURS 1919–1948

Bulgaria's air force was very active in WWII, first against an armada of US bombers and their fighter escorts in 1943 and 1944, then, following an about-face in early September 1944, they battled their former ally, the Germans. This notable air activity is largely unknown outside Bulgaria, and not very much appreciated even within the country. This two-volume series describes and illustrates all the fighter and fighter trainer aircraft used by the Bulgarian armed forces before, during, and shortly after WWII. The camouflage and markings of this large variety of aircraft types are described in great detail, fully illustrated in many rare photographs. Meticulously detailed colour profiles by artists Viktor Szalai and Kakuk Balazs show the markings of these aircraft types. This lavishly illustrated, full-colour two-volume series, of around 600 pages in total, is the ultimate reference work to the fighter and fighter trainer aircraft, and pilots, flying in Royal Bulgarian Air Force colours prior to, during, and shortly after World War Two.

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